AS CRIME GOES BY

DIANE K. SHAH

Murder in Hollywood's heyday

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ALWAYS A LADY

"She came to my office on Friday. She gave me a phony name. Are you going to let me see her, sergeant, or not?" asked Paris.

"Look, lady love. You say you don't know who this dame is. So you look at her puss. Then what? You still don't know who she is. You met her on Friday. Hey, whadda you care she's dead? Unless you know something. You got plans for tonight?"

I stood up. The air was fetid and I was beginning to feel faint. "I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what's got into me, coming here like this and taking up your time. Bothering you when you've got this horrible murder to solve. I'm really awfully sorry. Oh please don't get up, I'll see myself out."

I reached for the door knob. He was behind me in a flash. "I said *unless* you know something," he rasped, breathing down my neck. "You know something?"

I turned slowly around. The big lug was about two inches from my face. I met his eyes. "Billy," I said softly, "I know many things. And if it's her, I'll whisper every single one of them right into your ear."

My words sent him back a step. He gave me the once-over, twice. He cleared his throat. "You won't like it. She ain't looking so good. You won't get sick, will you?"

"No." I opened my purse again and pulled out a small bottle of Chanel No. 5. I dabbed a drop behind each ear. . . .

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Diane K. Shah

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This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, characters, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For helping me learn about the late Forties I am especially grateful to my parents, Ruth and Milton Kiver, and to two friends with long memories, director Richard Brooks and Los Angeles Times columnist Jim Murray. I am also indebted to the many people who took time out of their day to answer questions from a stranger on the telephone.

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"Hello! Welcome to Utley Mazer's Horoscope.

"At the sound of the chime, dial one or two numbers for the month you were born . . . Thank you!

"Now dial one or two numbers for the day you were born . . . Thank you!

"Lastly, dial four numbers for the year you were born. . . .

"Why, hello, Aries! Born on April 3, 1917. Your horoscope for today is . . .

"Ride out the storm at work . . . and be a better person for it!"

1

I was sitting at my desk reading the final edition of the *Examiner* and making faces at a cup of coffee, possibly brewed from printer's ink. It was nine-thirty in the morning. The office had not yet erupted into its normal state of raving delirium. But it would, soon. From this bedlam, around six o'clock, a daily newspaper would break out. I had yet to determine how.

A story on the front page reported that the legislature had urgently voted traffic the city's number-one problem, warning that if something was not done soon, Los Angeles would be branded the nation's "Death Trap." The air was getting worse; helicopters had been sent up to spy on major smog suspects. Joe DiMaggio was due to have surgery on his heel, W.C. Fields would be buried at noon, and an estranged husband, after reconciling with his wife, shot her divorce lawyer in the stomach, twice.

It was January 3, 1947. The year was off to a promising start.

Across the newsroom, Walter Ainsley was hammering away at his typewriter, a big crime story having apparently broken overnight. Nick Goodwin, the Ivy League glamour puss who works with me, had not called in yet and probably would not until well past noon. He seemed to get away with it. Etta Rice would be starting her incessant telephoning at home and would never appear at all. She existed, if she really did exist, only as a disembodied and querulous telephone voice, affecting a British accent when she remembered to. This left me in charge of the stack of white phone messages, the taken by operators overnight. I filed them where they belonged—under my telephone.

Just as it rang.

"There's someone down here to see you, Paris. A Miss Seeberg. She says it's important. Shall I send her up?"

I instructed Sadie Brown, the lobby receptionist, to put Miss Seeberg into the elevator, and then I stood up, straightened the seams of my stockings and walked down the hall to meet her.

The *Examiner* building is a delightful relic, erected in 1915, and stuck in downtown Los Angeles without any regard for the neighborhood. The building is a four-story Moorish stucco castle, nearly a block long and a half-block wide, that is supposed to resemble San Simeon, Mr. Hearst's weekend castle up north. It was probably an interesting idea at the time, but time had made the idea rather bizarre. Mr. Hearst almost never visits his newspaper anymore, so the castle concept is wasted on him. It is also wasted on the neighborhood. Staffers often have to elbow their way into the paper through a collection of skid-row bums who, having mistaken the *Examiner* for the mission soup kitchen five blocks away, line up for their morning oatmeal.

Mr. Hearst neglected to build a moat.

I stood on the cracked black lineoleum and waited. Eventually, the ancient elevator lurched to a stop and its doors creaked open. A slightly shaken Miss Seeberg pitched out. She was a shapely, mid-twentyish brunette, wearing a tailored navy suit, white blouse, and a navy pillbox hat pinned onto her perfectly combed pageboy. On her right arm she wore a diamond bracelet that must have given her a wrist-hernia after prolonged wear. She had beautiful hazel eyes framed by long, artfully mascaraed lashes. Michelangelo had nothing on Miss Seeberg's brush strokes.

"Miss Chandler?"

The hazel eyes were accusing.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"Oh." She tilted her head to one side and looked me over, possibly for flaws. She found one. "You're awfully young."

"Sorry. It's a habit I can't seem to kick." I gave her a smile that wasn't nice. "Please follow me."

With an expression that suggested I was leading her to the gallows, Miss Seeberg trailed me down the dirty linoleum toward the cluster of crippled wooden furniture known as the Society Department. My desk was scarred and sagging and saddled with a right rear leg that often buckled, usually on deadline. I was suddenly aware of how tawdry the place looked. Across the half wall, old newspapers, crumpled-up wrappers, and other debris carpeted the newsroom floor. Walter looked up, his eyes flicking over us. I said, "Please sit down," motioning to the lumpy brown leather chair beside my desk. She just stood there.

"I was told Etta Rice—"

"I'm her legman. Let me get those papers off the chair for you."

I picked up a stack of *Examiners* and tossed them onto Nick's chair. I doubted he would need it. He made personal house calls.

Miss Seeberg glanced at the chair I offered her as if checking for used gum, before carefully lowering herself into it. She rested her blue leather handbag on her lap and began pulling off her white gloves, finger by finger. "I don't often do this," she informed me. "I'm not in the business of publicizing my life, I abhor publicity." She paused as if wanting me to feel the full burden of her abhorment. Then she said, "But you see, I really need to get this in the paper, in Etta's column, tomorrow if you could."

"I can't promise anything, though I'll be happy to take down the information, Miss Seeberg."

"But it's absolutely necessary this get in. You see, I'm having an affair and—"

"Hang on." I rolled a piece of copy paper into my typewriter, tapped out the date and the time, then looked up. "Now, what day is your party?"

She stared at me for a moment before lowering those long spidery eyelashes. She opened her pocketbook and lifted a red-leather address book before extracting a silver cigarette case. She snapped it open and held it out to me. I shook my head. She removed a cigarette and went through the process of digging out a lighter, also silver. She inhaled once and left the lipstick-smudged cigarette smoldering in my ashtray.

She brought her eyes up to mine. They were also smoldering. "Not a party, Miss Chandler. An affair. I'm having an affair . . ."

"Right. Sorry."

". . . with a man."

I looked at her. She looked back. I asked for a cigarette. She gave me one. I had never come across this; someone *wanting* an affair in the paper. I had been at the *Examiner* only nine months and still wasn't sure if I was suited for even the routine duties, putting in the paper affairs people did *not* want in, or whether I was suited to work at all. I had been book-educated at private schools and charm-educated at Miss Turley's Tea Club, Wednesday afternoons, four o'clock sharp. My teenage years had been a careless collage of backyard swimming pools, debutante balls, and frequent trips to the principal's office, where I was known as "that pretty girl with a mouth on her." I was an only child. My father, a successful screenwriter presently under contract to Warner Bros., and my mother, a one-time B-movie actress, had instilled in me the importance of being able to handle any problem in life: by picking up the phone and getting someone else to take care of it. Or asking the housekeeper to.

Their plan was pronounced a success when I married into the Chandler family and moved into the nice house on Maple Drive in Beverly Hills, fully staffed. But two and a half years later, Russell died in the war. After moping around the house for eighteen months, dodging servants like bullets, though not the heavy artillery of my mother's hovering presence, I ran into the editor of the *Examiner* at a charity dinner. He suggested that I stop moping and dodging and come to work for him. Etta needed a good legman, he urged, and I had all of the right connections.

They taught me to type with two fingers.

Now those two fingers sat frozen on the keyboard as I stared at the feverish-faced Miss Seeberg.

"An affair," I said. "With a man. I see. And you want this information *printed*?"

She reached for a cigarette, hers, and puffed twice. The cigarette fluttered into the ashtray.

"That's right." Her crimson mouth tightened.

I wondered what he had done to her this morning. It wasn't even ten o'clock. I said, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. The guy's a louse." She hesitated. "Not my lover, my husband, Jack."

I glanced over at Nick's desk, wishing for once he were here. I looked back into a pair of brightly murderous eyes.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Your husband is Jack Seeberg?"

"You've got it, sister."

Jack Seeberg was a director under contract to MGM, well-known for his hot hand with a script, and his even hotter hand with a starlet. I could see her problem. "Why don't you just tell him you want a divorce?"

Or stay married and keep up the affair, I really wanted to say. Which is what sensible people did. Except in this town where divorces were a dime a dozen. It was a place you could gain actual status from one.

Then it struck me absurd that I was counseling this vengeful stranger on how to run her life. Etta did it all the time. Scolding movie stars for having public trysts or otherwise behaving in a manner she found personally offensive. But Etta was Etta, and the movie stars desperately needed her publicity. Her syndicated column was devoured by millions of gossip-hungry readers daily, and her 15-minute radio report went out coast-to-coast three nights a week. I was a faceless, $57.50-a-week assistant, who didn't even rate a byline.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was out of line."

"I want to see Etta," Mrs. Seeberg complained, her eyes casting about the newsroom as if the famous gossip columnist had to be lurking about somewhere.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You have a rotten marriage. You have a lover on the side. You want it known that you have this lover. So that . . . ?"

"Jack will give me a divorce." She looked at me as if I were an imbecile. Obviously, I had yet to get a handle on gossip. "Don't you see? It's the only way. If I ask him, he'll just laugh. But if I publicly humiliate him . . ."

I looked at the piece of copy paper in my typewriter. "I'm not sure how to phrase this," I began. I looked at her.

"Say Mrs. Jack Seeberg was seen . . ." She paused. "I wouldn't want to seem too obvious about this."

"Right."

"Just say, 'Mrs. Jack Seeberg was seen having a cozy lunch at the Brown Derby with a man who most definitely was not Mr. Jack Seeberg.' How's that?" She smiled for the first time.

"Uh . . ."

"And underline 'most definitely.'"

"You mean use italics."

"Yes, the whole thing, I-talian."

"And you don't care to name the Most Definitely Not Mr. Seeberg?"

"Most definitely not." Pretty little white teeth flashed.

"Mrs. Seeberg," I said. "If you were seen having this lunch, whom exactly was it that saw you?"

The joy went out of her face. Suspicion crept in. "What do you mean?"

"I mean if we write that you were seen, somebody had to have seen you. Like a waiter, or the maitre d', or Etta herself. Or someone who phoned Etta. It can't be you who sees yourself. When were you there?"

Anger displaced suspicion. She stood up, grabbing her white gloves and her navy bag. "Today. I'll be there *today*. And I want this in the paper, *tomorrow*. Good-bye, Miss Chandler."

She turned on her three-inch stiletto heels and smartly stalked away. I watched her. Somehow, in the stalking, she had learned to roll her hips.

I wondered how she did that.

2

The phone kept me busy for the next several hours. Gene Tierney called, hysterical, over an Item Etta wrote, which said, "Maybe there's nothing between Gene Tierney and Oleg Cassini, but I know that when she goes East in six weeks, he goes, too." The actress hoarsely whispered that she barely knew "Mr. Cassini," which was odd, considering that she had been recently married to him. I said I'd mention this to Etta. I hung up. The phone rang immediately. A press agent wanted an Item planted about yet another starlet from the Midwest taking a screen test. I made notes. The phone rang again. Another press agent wanted me to know that Jimmy Cagney was in town. I hung up. Again the phone. I lifted the receiver.

"Now the new year is complete, hearing your voice. It is wanton."

I picked up a red crayola and started drawing a violet on a yellowing sheet of copy paper. I said, "Oh, hello, Nick."

"I know. I'm not supposed to call you at the office, but I couldn't help it. How was your New Year's?"

"Wanton. How was Palm Springs?"

I had spent the evening with a high school girlfriend, two bottles of champagne, and Guy Lombardo burbling over the radio from Times Square. Nick, on the other hand, had installed himself as a houseguest of Martin Grilling, a Warner's producer whose New Year's parties traditionally ruined at least one Hollywood reputation, generally a major one. Word had not yet leaked on this year's victim. Nor on how Nick had wrangled the invitation.

He said, "It was outrageous, even by my standards. I'll tell you when I see you, maybe. Anything going on?"

I glanced up. Across the room Benny the one-eyed Bookmaker was walking jauntily over to Sports, homburg pulled low over his eyes. It was Friday and he was hoping to hustle some weekend action. Knowing Sports, there would be plenty of it. Daily Double, his wheezing dalmation, lumbered heavily at his heels. Walter was gone.

"Just the usual. How about you?" Something had to be coming. It always did.

"Listen," he said urgently. "I'm calling from a phone booth."

I grabbed a yellow crayon and began work on the tulip section. I could picture Nick, tall and with that goofy grin, standing in the phone booth, door ajar, as he kept one baby-blue eye fixed on his flashy green MG, idling at the curb, or on the requisite blonde draped across the front seat. Nick's car always came equipped with a blonde.

I said, "Uh-huh." I didn't like the way the tulips looked at all.

"You know the high-stakes poker game they play at Gardiner Folkes's house on Sunday nights?"

"Of course."

Everyone did. Each Sunday a collection of the town's wealthiest and most powerful men—studio heads, agents, actors, directors, a couple of businessmen—gathered at the palatial home of Folkes, "Dentist to the Stars," as he was known, for what can only be described as gladiator's night out. The game began precisely at six and ended at the stroke of midnight. Table stakes only. On Monday mornings, Folkes sent round his chauffeur to collect or pay up. In cash. But often the stakes were higher than the fortunes won or lost. An actor who couldn't pay his losses might never work again. Appositely, a young director who won big might never work for the mogul he had just bled to death. It was a tricky business.

Nick lowered his voice. "Listen to this, Paris. I heard there's cheating going on, big cheating. I heard the D.A. is already looking into it. I heard—"

"I don't think we can run a bunch of heards. This isn't a cattle roundup," I said.

"True. So what I thought was that you could find out."

I began working on the stems with lime green. It would be a springtime garden. I said, "Uh-huh."

"Like you could have dinner tonight with one of those guys. Maybe Arthur Heiman. Take him to Chasen's or something. Get him to tell you what's going on."

"Mm. Sounds divine."

"I mean it, Paris. A little candlelit dinner, some champagne, just you and him. He'll tell you. Hell, everyone tells you. And Etta would go nuts. This could be our big break. Maybe she'd let us have a byline."

"Us?"

"Us. Goodwin and Chandler." He paused. "It could be a remake of *The Front Page*, starring—"

"Arthur Heiman's a creep."

"You work magic with creeps."

"You could fool me."

"Okay, so I'll owe you. Whatever you want. Come on, Paris. This is important." Just then the operator broke in, demanding another nickel. That meant Nick must have been calling from a distance. I could hear a muffled yelling, "Babe! You got a nickel?"

Babe apparently didn't have one. The phone went dead.

I hung up.

I didn't know if I wanted a big break or, if I got one, what I would do with it anyway. I gazed at the garden sadly and crumpled up the paper. It was not a day for springtime flowers.

"Oh God."

I grabbed my three-quarter-length white wool coat, my white gloves, and took off down the stairs. Thirty-seven of them, I had counted. I had totally lost track of the time and now it was ten to one. I bolted through the ornate marble lobby, under the frescoed ceiling, and out the glass doors onto the street. I squinted into the bright glare of the sun. It was a beautiful crisp afternoon. But as usual, there was nothing going on. Not down here, on Broadway.

I crossed the street to the parking lot, inhaling the greasy fumes from Henry's Hamburger Joint, installed on a corner of the lot in a crude wooden structure that Henry had hammered up himself. It was just big enough for a counter, eight stools, and the grill, which you could see through the grease-spattered windows. I did not see my car, however. *Anywhere*.

Tony, the lanky Mexican with the pressed white shirts who ran the lot, smiled and waved but continued pitching a baseball to his younger brother, Hector, crouched thirty feet away behind the rear of a pink Studebaker. Hector wore a New York Yankees cap. Martin was nowhere in sight.

"He's not here," Tony shouted unnecessarily. And pitched another ball.

"Do you know where he went?" I called, picking my way through the cars that *were* there.

"An audition, I think." Tony went chasing after a ball that his brother had returned badly.

"Did he say when he'd be back?" The Brown Derby was all the way over in Hollywood.

"No, Miss Chandler, I don't think so."

I turned toward the street, hoping for a rare sighting of a taxicab. There were none, of course. You'd have better luck sighting a whooping crane in downtown Los Angeles than a simple yellow taxicab. By the time I called one, and it actually arrived, and the driver got me to Hollywood, it would probably be too late.

I went back into the paper cursing myself and cursing my mother. When she informed me, in no uncertain terms, that proper ladies never drove, she neglected to give me the scoop on chauffeurs.

Chauffeurs who affixed their eyes to theater marquees and their hands to a movie script, with a death hold.

3

“Roger, we'll have the Scottish salmon to start and the butterfly steak,” Arthur Heiman said.

“Any salad, sir, fresh vegetables, potatoes? Perhaps the creamed spinach for the lady.”

Arthur ran his manicured fingernail down the menu, saying, “Hmmm.” Then he said, “House salads for both and one order of the fries. Thank you, Roger.”

He handed his menu up and straightened his tie. I put my chin on my hand and smiled. We were sitting in one of the semicircular red leather booths up front as you walk into Chasen's. A prime table for a surprised Arthur Heiman and his blushing, tremulous date.

I hated this.

“I'm so happy you called me, Paris, it's been much too long since I've seen you. Is your drink all right?”

“My drink is fine, Arthur, just fine.” I lifted the glass to my lips and smiled. Then I took the biggest gulp I dared. Arthur gazed imbecilically into my eyes.

He was, I would guess, late thirties, fifteen pounds overweight, and perhaps three years from becoming what we at the paper would describe as “balding.” For the time being, his thinning brown hair adequately made the rounds. He wore glasses, a bright red tie, and a cloying cologne. On the other side of the ledger, he owned the biggest radio station in Los Angeles. Years ago, my father had written a two-part drama for him. I was seventeen at the time. Arthur hadn't taken his moist eyes off me since.

“So,” he said. “Tell me. What are you doing with yourself? Did I hear you were working for some newspaper?”

“Yes, the *Los Angeles Examiner*.” I stared at the salmon put before me and slowly began to slice it into slender threads.

“The *Examiner*? Hearst's paper? Why, Paris, how could you do that, married to a Chandler. Your in-laws must be furious.”

My in-laws had been furious since the day Russ told them we were going to be married. I was Hollywood nouveau riche, not Pasadena or Hancock Park proper. When he died they had tried to take the house back, claiming it had been *their* wedding present to *their* son and the mortgage was still in *their* name. The messy fight that ensued made every paper in town, except of course theirs, the *Times*. In the end, the court ruled the Chandlers could have their house back, while I would get to keep Russ's Bentley, a prized 1939 4½-liter model with a Park Ward saloon, and the forty-by-twenty-foot swimming pool, which had been my parents' wedding present to *me*.

The water rights had not been spelled out.

At the moment, I was living in neither the Bentley nor the pool, but in the State's Evidence No. 001 house. The appeals process ground on.

"Mr. Van Ettisch was nice enough to offer me a job," I said. "And the Chandlers didn't."

"But why should they?" Arthur gallantly shoveled french fries onto my plate and asked if I would like him to salt them for me.

"I don't really understand why you would want to work at a newspaper," he said grievously. "Don't your hands get awfully dirty? I mean, what do you do there anyway? It's not like you need the money."

I laughed. "Fifty-seven fifty a week, Arthur. And I still prefer silk stockings. They cost. Besides, I was bored to tears." I grinned. "Maybe you should put me on the radio."

He gave me a sharp look. "Doing what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something. You could think of something. I have a nice voice, don't you think? And if I were on the radio, my hands would be, well, you know, clean and . . . soft."

Arthur put down his fork. A hand, not soft, but heavy and damp, clamped itself onto my knee. "Is that what this is all about?" he said hoarsely. "You called me up and invited me out for a *job*?"

Gently I removed his hand from my leg. "Don't be silly, of course not. I just . . . oh, look. Isn't that Cary Grant?"

"Yes it is," said Arthur, swiveling his head. "Can't see who the woman is."

"I just saw him in *Notorious* last week," I said. "He's not a bad actor. Actually, he's quite good, don't you think, Arthur? But I can't help wondering about these leading men. What will they do when their looks go?"

"That's one thing you won't have to worry about, my sweet."

Actually, it was something I worried about a lot. I had my mother's green eyes and light hair and fine bone structure. And I was slender. But I had my father's intelligence. What this meant was that I couldn't figure out what my looks were supposed to do for me. I had seen what they had done for my mother: made her into a helpless doll whose moods coincided with the numbers on the bathroom scale and whose frustrations over the emptiness of her life were channeled into the over-orchestration of mine. Even if Russell had survived the war, if he hadn't wandered off during the liberation of Paris in search of a boulevard bistro he had remembered from his childhood and died when a drunken taxi driver swerved into his bicycle, I don't think I could have spent a happy, fulfilling life in the Bel Air Junior League.

I watched the actor and the dark-haired woman slip around the corner into the other room. The place was swirling with women dripping in diamonds and men choked in silk ascots, moving in and moving out.

"Eat your steak,"Arthur cooed.

I glanced at my watch. I said, "Arthur, would you excuse me for a minute? I'll be right back."

I took the long way around to the ladies' room, catching a glimpse of Grant, laughing as he lighted his date's cigarette. Once inside the rest room, I stood there uncertainly. Then I dropped a coin into the pay phone and rang the city desk. Mike Sporetti, the night city editor, picked up.

"It's Paris," I said. "I have an item to add to Etta's column for tomorrow. Uh-huh. 'Cary Grant was seen tête-à-tête with Ave Gardner in a back booth at Chasen's last night. As we all know, the leading man is *Notorious* with the ladies.' That's all, Mike. Thanks."

Slowly I replaced the receiver onto its metal collar. I gave the mirror a long searching look. A pair of troubled green eyes gazed back. Etta had said, "My dear, you must remember that these people love to see their names in the newspaper. If they didn't, I wouldn't have a job."

I took a deep breath and plastered a fresh smile on my face.

The night was still young, I feared.

"So how are you, Arthur? You haven't said a word about yourself. Family okay?"

"Well, yes, I suppose. Emily has her weight problem, you know. She took up tennis for a while, but her back started bothering her. The kids are fine. And you? Any beaux? It's been what, two years now?"

"A little more. No, I don't get out much, but I know I should try." I sighed.

Arthur leered. Roger reappeared. He asked if we would like dessert. Without consulting me, Arthur said I would have some ice cream, nothing for him. And coffee.

"I can see you don't care about my waistline at all," I said with a pout.

"Hell with your waistline," Arthur grunted. "I want to watch you lick the spoon."

Nick Goodwin, I decided, was going to be hocked up to his ears for this one.

The ice cream arrived. I licked the spoon. And said, "I hear you're a wonderful poker player," moving into what I hoped was the final act.

Arthur blushed. "How would you know that?"

"I heard. I heard you play in a big game on Sunday nights. I heard you really clean up. You must be terribly good, Arthur." I was beginning to sound like Nick. All heards.

"Well, I do play some cards with the boys," he admitted.

"Mm-hm."

"Is that any good?"

"Delicious. Tell me more."

"I'm sure you couldn't understand the game. It would bore you."

I ran the edge of my spoon along the tablecloth in slow lazy circles. I looked up at him from under my eyelashes, a frankly useful move my mother had taught me when I was about three. "Well, maybe not the game." I smiled. "But the money, Arthur. Money I understand."

Arthur returned my smile weakly. "Eat your ice cream."

It was vanilla. Creamy and soft. I dipped my spoon into a small amount and slipped it through my lips.

His coffee cup clattered onto its saucer.

"Let's get out of here," Arthur Heiman said.

We went to Ciro's. He ordered champagne. We danced. And drank more champagne. By the time I—smiling with heart-tugging regret—slammed my front door in his face, I had found out what I thought Nick wanted to know. Or some of it.

It wasn't worth the price.

"Your horoscope for today is . . .

"Unbelievable changes renew your family life—break out of a rut!"

4

As Etta Rice's only legmen, Nick or I had to be on duty over the weekends. So we traded off.

This weekend was mine.

Martin wanted to take the Bentley so he could stand in the parking lot all afternoon polishing it, as opposed to the new Chrysler convertible, which was gathering dust in the garage. The car had been a gift from my parents, who considered the aging Bentley a social embarrassment. Martin knew better.

"Which is what you said you were going to do yesterday, when we took the Bentley, only you didn't," I said petulantly as my chauffeur, sitting up front, cap pulled low over his eyes, poked along Olympic Boulevard dreamily.

Martin was twenty-seven and still waiting for life's big break. I thought I had given it to him when I hired him. But no. Like hundreds of attractive, not fully grounded young men, he was determined to make it in the movies. He was medium height and probably had the looks for it—light brown hair, dimpled smile—and maybe he could even act, I didn't know. He kept a barbell set behind the garage, and if he wasn't lifting weights, he was standing out there shirtless, bellowing passages from *Henry IV*.

Unfortunately, Martin had a major film flaw. He had a high nasally voice. He had more than a few chauffeur flaws.

"Martin, you simply can't go off like that without telling me. Not while I'm at work."

I could hear him breathing. He was sulking.

"Martin, I will try to make accommodations for you, I don't think I'm being unreasonable." More breathing. "Martin, what's the matter with you? Say something."

He sniffed. "Please stop calling me Martin."

"Oh."

More silence. A streetcar clattered by on the left, leaving us in its dust.

"Do you want me to call you Donald again?"

"No," said Martin. "I've decided now to be Bret."

Walking into the *Examiner* on Saturdays is like walking onto a silent stage; the props are in place but the actors have gone out on break. Alone, randomly roaming through the various departments, stopping to read the bulletin board or a story on someone's desk, I felt as if I belonged.

On Saturdays, distant pockets of the newsroom are left dark and only a few people venture in. This is because most of the Sunday paper is written on Friday. Everything except late-breaking stories in news and sports have already been set in type. Early afternoon always finds a handful of reporters pounding away, and then at four, the copy editors drift in.

The other reason I like Saturdays is the chance to have lunch with Walter Ainsley.

I arrived at the office just after noon. Normally I take Items over the phone from Etta and put them into column form—that is, grammatical English, which Etta treats like a lost language. Unlike the rest of her staff, two secretaries and Nick, I did not work directly out of her house in Holmby Hills. I had been told there was no room and had been inserted instead into Society. My secret theory was that Etta, insecure and paranoid, wanted an "ear" at the paper to relay what was being said about her. Out of kindness I would report, "Nothing really." Followed by, "Oh everyone *adored* the Henry Fonda thing."

On Saturday I also followed up on last-minute or leftover tips she had ferreted out. And when the column was finished, I would call and read it to her and see if she wanted any changes.

Walter wasn't in yet, so I flicked on the lights in the Society Department and began clearing off my desk, culling through a week's collection of notes, phone messages, crayon gardens, sandwich wrappers, crumbs, and cigarette ashes that somehow accumulates on a person's desk. Which is how I found the lighter.

I picked it up and studied it. This was no cheap silver-plated item, but the real, solid silver thing. Miss Seeberg—Mrs. Seeberg—must have forgotten it when she went sashaying out of here the day before with her nose out of joint. I phoned the Brown Derby and asked for William, the maitre d'.

"My *dear*. How can I help you." William sounded bored.

"A small thing actually. I want to let Mrs. Seeberg know I have her lighter. Could you ask her to phone me the next time she comes in?"

"Mrs. Seeberg often comes in two, three times a week."

"Really. Who does she dine with?"

"Oh Mrs. Lacey, Mrs. Foxdale, Mrs. Zanuck, that crowd."

"I see."

"Anyway, I will tell her you called."

"Do you remember if she came in for lunch yesterday?"

"Uh . . . John! Table eight! Hello there, Mr. Simpson. Um, Miss Chandler? I don't think so. But it's such bedlam here on Fridays, it's hard to know who came in. Shall I check the reservations book?"

"Please."

When he came back on the line he said Mrs. Seeberg had not been in, as far as he could tell. I thanked him and rang off.

I put the lighter in a drawer and finished tidying up. Perhaps the reservation had been under the name of her boyfriend. But it seemed odd that she would choose to flaunt her affair at a restaurant where she was so well-known. I mean, who would take her seriously? It also seemed odd that she dined with the Black Widow ladies. She didn't seem their type.

I yawned. Last night had wiped me out. It wasn't so much the champagne, it was that I had nearly smiled myself to death. I walked back to the Home Cooking Department and put a pot of coffee on the stove. Nobody was quite certain what went on in the Home Cooking Department. Although it was fully outfitted with stove, sink, and refrigerator, no cooking ever seemed to take place here. Recipes appeared in the paper under the mysterious byline of Patience Pattycake, whoever that was. And our restaurant critic, Dolph Mann, was rumored to be an odd sort who skulked around town in disguise. No one was sure if he ever came to the paper or not, because no one was sure what he looked like.

My phone was ringing when I got back to my desk. It was Roxy, Etta's No. 1 secretary (as opposed to Marilyn, her personal-appointments secretary) calling to say that Etta would be ready to go in an hour. In the meantime, Roxy said, could I try to get hold of Rita Hayworth and find out if it was true that she had started divorce proceedings against Orson Welles.

"Er . . ."

"This is her number," said Roxy with a yawn.

I wrote it down and drank some coffee. I practiced. "Miss Hayworth? Could you . . . did you . . . is it possible . . . I know this is preposterous but . . . I have it on good authority that . . ."

I dialed the number.

A housekeeper, or one of those persons who can't speak English but whom people invariably hire to answer their phones, kept bleating, "*Quien? Quien?*"

"Paris Chandler," I repeated. "From the *Los Angeles Examiner*. From the newspaper. Please, is Miss Hayworth at home?"

A furious babble of Spanish issued forth. I swiveled round to face the newsroom, hoping that maybe a Mexican janitor had wandered in. Suddenly a voice intervened.

"Hello, may I help you?" in perfect idiomatic English.

"Yes, thank you," I said laughing. "Is Miss Hayworth . . . is this Miss Hayworth?"

"Yes. And you are . . . ?"

"Paris Chandler. From the *Examiner*. I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Hayworth, but—"

"That's all right."

"I wanted to check out a report that you were filing for divorce."

She was so quiet I couldn't even hear her breathing.

"Miss Hayworth?"

"Yes. I'm here. And I'd be happy to respond to your report."

The force with which she slammed down the receiver made me wonder if she had broken her phone. I sighed. I didn't really blame her. Knowing Etta, she had probably already tried Miss Hayworth and had failed and had passed the buck to me.

I walked into the newsroom, hoping for a sign of Walter. But the big wooden desks, row after row of them, were still vacant. Over along the wall opposite the windows, the wire service machines clattered like toy false teeth. A skinny, bespectacled man, wearing a rumpled white shirt and suspenders, was bent over one machine reading off the tape. Phil Hadley had come back from the war a sergeant, and seemed hooked on the habit. I asked him if he had seen Walter.

He did not look up. "He's taking sick leave."

"He's sick?"

Sergeant Phil angrily tore off a piece of tape and glared at the dizzy array of pinholes, shaking his head. "I can't figure it. Can you figure it? People in New York and Philly rushing out to buy TV receiving sets and they can only beam a signal fifty miles. So every fifty miles they're going to have to build a damn TV station. And I'm still on the waiting list for a damn new car."

"Do you think he's okay?"

Phil Hadley finally turned his head and looked at me. "You're on company time, young lady." And he marched away.

I killed half an hour reading the paper and then I got to work. By five-thirty, I had the column written and approved by Etta. I was pushing it into the pneumatic tube, which would convey it down to the typesetters, when my phone rang.

"Miss Chandler?" came the deep throaty voice of a woman.

"Speaking."

"This is Helen Seeberg. And I want to apologize for yesterday. I was really very upset."

I hadn't recognized the voice. For the phone, she put more body English into it. "That's all right, Mrs. Seeberg. Are things better now?"

"I guess you could say so." She laughed. "He just took off for the weekend, didn't tell me where. Actually I know where. We have a weekend house in Santa Barbara. A script meeting, he called it."

"I see."

In the background I could hear Dick Haymes singing "Million-Dollar Baby." She seemed to hesitate, as if she too were listening. Then, "With a very prominent, very beautiful movie star."

"Ah."

"It's too bad I'm not a writer like yourself. I swear, I could publish a whole book. You have no idea, Miss Chandler, and it's just as well." She inhaled deeply. "I'd call it 'Desperate Wives.'"

"Maybe you're jumping to conclusions." Without realizing it, my eyes had drifted back to the pneumatic tube. "Who is the star?"

"I didn't mean to keep you. I've got to run."

"Of course. You probably have plans."

There was a long silence. Then, "Nothing really. Just a quiet little dinner at Romanoff's, eight o'clock. Do you know Romanoff's, Miss Chandler?"

"It's quite the place to be seen, I would say."

"In the back room, there's a table just to the left as you walk in. It's my favorite table."

"A table for two," I put in.

"Very romantic," she said.

"Mm."

"Well, I'd better be going. By Monday, I should know more about Jack's weekend. I wouldn't want to be premature."

"I understand." I paused. "By the way, I have your lighter. I could perhaps—"

"That would be fine. Goody-bye, then, Miss Chandler."

I put down the phone. And tapped my fingernails on the desk. A very prominent, very beautiful movie star. I said, "Rita Hayworth?" to no one in particular.

No one in particular answered me.

* * *

My house was lit up like Grauman's Chinese Theater when we pulled into the driveway, six-thirty on the dot. Almost immediately the door flew open and out stepped Mrs. Keyes, looking like a photo from the *National Geographic*. Her head was covered with rows of long, white rods, a sort of exotic tribal headdress, and her body came packaged in a relic of a blue terry-cloth robe. White pompons bobbed on the tips of her red satin slippers.

"How come you're not at the movies?" I walked up the front stairs. "Is something wrong?" Mrs. Keyes always went to the movies on Friday and Saturday nights, no matter what. I stopped and sniffed.

A perfectly horrible smell permeated the house and grew worse as I headed down the hall toward the kitchen. I turned and looked at my housekeeper, who was trailing right behind me. Willa Keyes was a thin, nosy Irishwoman with faded blue eyes and, like Martin—make that Bret—a curious fetish for polishing. Everything in the house shone like the Hope diamond, including the waste bins, which now had facets. I tried never to sit too long in one spot.

Mrs. Keyes had been with me nearly five years, having appeared one morning holding the newspaper ad I had placed, but no references. She explained that her husband had recently run out on her, taking off with a lizard-tongued hussy lounge singer, as I think she put it, and now she couldn't face being alone.

As with Martin—formerly known as Donald—I felt the urge to help out. Besides, she had boasted of her fine culinary skills, which quickly sold Russell, but which, to this day, she had yet to display any evidence of. I suspected she tried on my clothes when I was out.

She smiled ingenuously.

"I gave myself a Tony, see? And you have to leave it on for nine hours. So I have to stay in. So my sister's coming for me in the morning, if that's okay with you."

The look on my face must have said that nine hours of smelling a permanent was not okay with me.

"Now, now." She patted my arm solicitously and nudged me along the hall. "Let's go have a nice cuppa tea."

* * *

I was soaking in the tub when Nick called, saying of course it was urgent.

I grabbed one of the bath towels stacked on the marble ledge that ran along the head of the tub, and climbed out. The pink Florentine marble floor was cold as I dripped across it and through the door that opened into my bedroom. The towel around me was damp; I didn't want to sit on the gray satin bed cover. So I stood by the bedside table, saying:

"Let me guess. Your car broke down. You couldn't get to the bank yesterday, could I loan you a twenty. You can't get a reservation at—"

"Paris, I'm hurt."

"Perhaps it's just that you don't know what kind of flowers to send her." He had once called me at three o'clock in the morning for advice on that account, explaining, "I want the flowers delivered with her milk." Things like that tend to stick in a person's mind.

"Actually," said Nick, "I'm calling to see if you could have dinner with me. That is, if you're through."

"You mean you've run out of blondes already? In this town?"

"You're not."

"I am so," I said. "I've never even used peroxide."

"I meant you're not through needling me. We all appreciate the purity of your blondness."

"That's the least you should appreciate me for after last night. You owe me, Nicky. But dinner isn't necessary. In fact, it isn't even close to being enough."

"It was that bad, huh?"

"There are perspiration stains all over my dress from his sweaty little palms."

"But not all over your body, I suppose."

"What's over my body is a towel. I'm dripping wet. I appreciate the offer, but I really can't."

"Can't? You mean you have a date?"

I wiggled my toes on the soft gray carpet. "Well, no. I'm having dinner at my parents'."

"Ah," said Nick. The smell, and Mrs. Keyes, entered my bedroom, one after the other. My dress for the evening was draped over her arm. She opened one of the mirrored doors to my closet and hung the dress up. Nick was saying something.

"Excuse me?"

"In that case . . . I'll go with you."

"To my parents'? I doubt that you would want to. Our dinner table is like Berlin. Divided into sectors and occupied by unfriendly powers."

"Come on, Paris. I've always wanted to meet your dad. And your mom, too. I'm good at armistice."

"I don't think you understand. My mother has barely spoken to me since I took a J-O-B. All I need to do is bring along someone from the office."

"You underestimate my charm."

I was standing pigeon-toed and shivering. Actually, having someone else at the dinner table was not a bad idea. My mother would flirt with Nick, as she did with all men, giving her less time to carp at me. I said, "Be here a little before eight, then. We can take my car. I have to make a stop first. And Nick?"

"Yes."

"Martin is now Bret."

Nick arrived on time wearing a double-breasted navy suit with a white carnation in his lapel. I wore a bottle-green silk dress under a white wool cape and matching green silk shoes. Bret pleaded a headache.

Nick drove his car, the recently acquired MG, which, even used, seemed quite an indulgence for a fellow always in debt. I told him we had to stop at Romanoff's, and why. We turned onto Santa Monica Blvd. and headed west toward Beverly Hills. "You're not listening," I said.

"Hm? No, I am, I am. Mrs. Seeberg thinks her husband is sleeping with Rita Hayworth and she wants revenge. It's perfectly obvious."

Large drops of water began to splash across the windshield. He switched on the wipers.

"Not Rita Hayworth—do you think?"

Nick ran his hand across the windscreen, clearing it. He seemed preoccupied.

I said, "If only she'll tell us the name of the movie star it could be a great item. But of course, she won't tell until I print this thing about her affair. Nick?"

He was leaning forward, staring hard into the night.

"Slow down, this is Rodeo. Why do I have the feeling I'm being set up?"

"Because you are," said Nick. "That's what we do for a living, let people set us up."

"I just haven't been hit from this direction before." I paused. "You'd think people would stay home on a night like this."

Across the street a line of luxury cars stood idling, waiting for Romanoff's valet service. Nick made a sharp U-turn and nudged in behind a black LaSalle. Romanoff's valet was standing beside the passenger door of a maroon Cadillac, holding an umbrella and trying to maneuver a fat lady out. Horns were beginning to honk.

"Maybe I'd better run in."

Nick pulled on the hand brake. "No, I'll go. Be right back."

"But the cars . . . what will I do if they move?"

The fat lady's right foot had just made it onto the pavement. "They won't," said Nick, sliding out of the car.

"Remember, first table on the left," I called after him.

He grinned. "I know what she looks like."

I pulled down the visor and stared in the mirror. Going to see my mother always made me fixate on mirrors. My lipstick looked faded. I opened Nick's glove compartment, looking for a Kleenex. A large manila envelope, rolled lengthwise, swan-dived onto the floor. I picked it up and slid two fingers inside. They reemerged clasping a sheaf of typewritten pages. I scanned the first one. Flipped through the others, getting really sore now, thinking . . . *the creep*. The phony, conniving creep.

I put the pages back in the envelope and lay it in my lap.

Five minutes later, horns now honking at me, Nick slid in behind his fashionable right-hand steering wheel. He turned the rearview mirror toward himself and ran his fingers through his damp hair. "Will your mother hold it against me if I'm wet?" he said cheerfully.

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. She wasn't there."

"You looked?"

"Wrong couple at the right table. I found Mike Romanoff. No Mrs. Seeberg has come in or is due to come in."

"Did you check the bar?"

"When I go to Romanoff's, I always check the bar."

I shot him a look.

He gave me a wolfish grin and switched on the radio. Sinatra began trying to push "That Old Black Magic" through the static. The rain was splish-splashing loudly on the canvas roof, lending its own percussionist interpretation to the music. Cars had begun snaking around Nick's and now we were penned in. I said, "They should have called the night on account of rain."

Nick patted my knee. "Cheer up. We haven't even hit the war zone yet."

"Yes we have." I held up the manila envelope. "'The Kelly Girls'?"

Nick adjusted the mirror. "Oh, it's just a few pages, the first scenes. I thought—"

"We are not showing Daddy our movie script tonight, Nicky, and I think it was creepy of you to pull this." I pushed the envelope back into the glove compartment, purposely scrunching it, then stared out the rain-streaked window. It was coming down in sheets, making it impossible to see the faces of the couples as they bolted from their cars into the restaurant.

I sighed inwardly and wondered if Mrs. Seeberg were having a nicer time than I.

I said, "Mulholland Drive."

I had forgotten to bring the lighter anyway.

5

Nick Goodwin was twenty-eight, smooth, witty, and genuinely smart. And I didn't know if I trusted him at all.

He arrived at the *Examiner* a year before me, with grand notions of becoming L.A.'s Walter Winchell. Journalistically, he had no experience. He had studied English at Princeton, followed by a year at Fordham Law before dropping out to go to war. He got as far as Fort Polk, Louisiana, where an Army doctor picked up a heart murmur. He was reassigned to writing the endless memoranda the military felt impelled to churn out.

According to his story, he followed a girl to Los Angeles, liked the life and decided to become a writer. Actually, what he really wanted, I always thought, was to become a man-about-town. And no one was more man-about-town, or woman-about-town, than a gossip columnist. They were given the best tables in the best nightclubs and accorded seats of honor at the most glamorous dinner parties the luminaries could concoct. There was really no way to describe the power they wielded, except to say that the words "cringe," "prostrate," and "fawn," were invented only after gossip columnists were.

The possibilities dazzled Nick. Only two roadblocks stood in the way. The intrinsic inanity of gossip, which was not lost on him and which, I suspected, encouraged him to play fast and loose with some of his Items. The second problem was that Nick, while an undisciplined and careless reporter, was a truly talented writer. From Walter Winchell, he now had visions of becoming Nunnally Johnson or Ben Hecht.

Knowing me, with my connections, did not hurt.

"Next driveway on the right," I told him.

As soon as we started up the long, winding drive I realized my mother had come up with the same idea I had. Only of course she would carry it out on a much grander scale. Whereas I had invited Nick to serve as buffer, she had invited Hollywood.

"Your dad always did like pictures with casts of thousands," Nick deadpanned, pulling up behind a Rolls.

"This smells like an Irene Masterson production to me," I countered as I stared hard into the rain. A long blue canopy had been erected from the portico to the drive so guests would not get wet as they stepped out of their cars. I added, "Tell the boy to put your car near the garage. Then we can make a quick getaway."

At least five boys in slickers were dashing about parking cars. Nick corraled one, gave his instructions then nudged me along the portico with two other couples entering the house. A pert-looking maid wearing a starched black uniform and a crisp white apron took our coats. When she decided we weren't famous, her expression turned pouty. I doubted she was out of her teens.

"Now what do we do?" Nick said eagerly.

"We find my parents, we make polite, insipid remarks, then we bolt for the buffet table."

Nick adjusted his carnation and took my arm. A couple of giggly girls were coming down the winding staircase. One caught his eye and preened. He winked.

I whispered, "Don't restrain yourself on my account."

"I always restrain myself on your account." He paused in the doorway to the Grand Living Room. "Ooh, la-la. Just like Versailles."

In fact, the chandeliers had come from some obscure French castle. The rugs were Persian, the couches velvet. It was the only room in the house in which my mother had fully indulged her fantasies. The other nine rooms were a compromise, a sort of Victorian-California contemporary blend. Forty feet away, in a distant corner, Ira Gershwin was seated at the baby grand playing show tunes, surrounded by men and women singing along. Through the archway behind him, in the Family Living Room, several couples jitterbugged.

Robert, the white-haired live-in butler, hurried over, balancing a silver tray. "Good evening, Miss Paris. May I offer you champagne?"

We each took a glass, and then my mother spotted me and broke away from the group around the piano.

I nudged Nick. "Hold your hat," I said.

"Her?" he said.

"Darling!" my mother said, reaching up, pursing her lips, but just missing my cheek. She was wearing a body-hugging violet organza gown, low cut, and accessorized by a diamond collar made up of rocks the size of bubble-gum balls. She wore a small diamond barrette in her short taffy-colored hair. At forty-nine, my mother was a knockout.

"I'm so glad you could make it, dear, I was worried you wouldn't," she murmured, not looking at me, but at Nick. She lowered her eyelashes. "And who is this?"

"This" looked slightly stunned.

"Nick, I would like to present my mother, Irene Masterson. Mom, this is Nick Goodwin. We work together at the paper."

She held out her small, perfectly manicured hand. "How do you do, Mr. Goodwin."

Nick bent and actually kissed her fingertips. "It's my pleasure, Mrs. Masterson. You have a lovely daughter. And now, of course, I see why."

I was pretty sure I didn't want to stick around for the rest of this. "Where's Dad?" I jumped in.

"Out by the pool, darling. You must go see him right away. Luckily, we had the tents set up or I don't know what we would do with this depressing rain." She smiled at Nick. "And what do you do at the paper, Mr. Goodwin?"

"Please call me Nick, Mrs. Masterson. I—"

"He's a writer, Mother. A very good writer. Come Nick, I'd like to show you around."

"I look forward to seeing you again later," Nick said to my mother.

She offered him a full-blown ingenue smile, the kind where you had to lower your lashes to really pull it off. "And I, too, Mr. Goodwin . . . Nick."

I led Nick quickly away, though he did manage one over-the-shoulder killer smile. "This is the beast?" he said, unable to keep the amazement out of his voice.

"The beast *and* the beauty." I could feel Nick's eyes on me as we walked through the Family Living Room, out the French doors, and onto the tented patio. I said, "No, she was not twelve when she had me. Yes, she was even more beautiful when she was younger. And yes, a bit of cosmetic surgery has been performed. Her body, however, is the real thing."

Nick took my hand. "Relax, Paris. It's okay."

The tent was aswirl with dozens of people holding china plates filled from the various tables set along the tent's perimeter. I spotted my father standing with a couple of studio executives near the enchilladas. He stepped away from them when he saw me.

"Hello, baby! Give me a kiss."

My father, Paul Masterson, is a large, broad-shouldered man with a crew cut gone gray and a waistline gone to fat. In my younger years he had been distant, somewhat neurotic, and totally consumed by his work. But age, success, and Russell's death had brought out a warm, concerned, and belatedly loving parent. I introduced him to Nick then excused myself to say hello to some old family friends.

Hours passed before I saw Nick again.

I was filling a coffee cup from the priceless brass samovar my mother had trotted out when, from over my shoulder a voice murmured, "At last we are alone."

Startled, I turned and found myself facing an extraordinarily handsome man, well over six feet tall, with dark eyes and a cleft chin. His hair was sandy-colored and his teeth, against the tan skin, seemed to glow. I had noticed him earlier, moving about the various rooms, glass in hand, chatting amiably with this couple or that, but always standing out. It was perhaps his size, or the way he carried himself. He was a man meant to be noticed.

"You certainly took your time," I replied, feeling somewhat unnerved. "Coffee?"

"Please."

I saw my fingers tremble as I twisted the spigot on the samovar and tried to hold the saucer steady as the coffee sluiced into the cup. "There," I said, turning round, handing him his coffee.

"Before, everytime I saw you, you were either on the dance floor or flirting with a great-looking guy."

"Mm," I said, holding my coffee but not drinking it. A very large man. Quite a neck jutting out of the open collar of his white shirt, the navy blazer unbuttoned. His nose was short and broad, when it should have been long and narrow. It was a flaw a girl could overlook. I smiled. "I think you have me confused with my twin sister. I've been in the kitchen, slaving, all night."

"Then I must rescue you." Dimples, too. But he didn't strike me as being an actor; he seemed too at ease.

"Do you have a name?" I asked. "I'll need one for my memoirs."

He took a step and put his coffee down on the table beside the samovar. Then he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He put it between his teeth and struck a match. "Jack," he said, bringing the light up to his cigarette. "Seeberg."

I blinked. Jack Seeberg? How many could there be? I turned slightly away from him, trying to gain some composure. "I believe I've heard the name somewhere."

"Probably in the kitchen." He flicked the burnt match into an ashtray. "And yours?"

"Paris."

"Like the city?"

"I can't say. I've never been."

"Then I must take you," he exclaimed. "We'll sail on the *Queen Elizabeth*. Immediately!"

"And what will you tell your wife, Mr. Seeberg?"

He exhaled a large plume of smoke. "Ah, poor Helen. She's in a sanitarium you know. They say it was the sun."

I giggled.

He put an arm around my shoulders. "Do not cry, my beautiful one. All of my movies have happy endings."

"Let me guess this one. At least we'll always have Paris?"

"No, no. Just, 'We'll always have Paris,'" said Nick, nudging in. "You mustn't misquote Bogie. I hope I'm not interrupting."

I sighed inwardly. "Nick, this is Jack Seeberg. Mr. Seeberg, Nick Goodwin."

"How do you do," said Nick. "*Downtown, USA* is one of my favorite movies."

"Well, thank you," said Seeberg. He moved over to the table and crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. "I'd better be running along."

"Au revoir," I said gaily.

He grinned and gave me a wink. I watched him walk away, edging through the people, toward the door of the tent. "Imagine," I sighed, "cheating on a man like that. I wonder who her boyfriend is, Gary Cooper?"

"I doubt it," said Nick. "Anyway, she said they haven't been to Romanoff's in three years. Her husband had a run-in with the Prince."

Reluctantly, my eyes came back to Nick. "What are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Seeberg. She told me that a little while ago. I tried to get your attention but you were always gadding about, smiling into men's eyes. You're a flirt."

I put down my coffee cup. "Helen Seeberg is here? But I would have seen her. You must be mistaken."

"Possibly, but that was years ago. Follow me."

We went out the tent and in through the doors of the Family Living Room. But we were roadblocked by a crowd doing the bunny hop. By now, the rain had turned to drizzle, so we darted across the lawn and in through the front door. Nick stopped as we entered the Grand Living Room. Mr. Gershwin had vanished and someone else was at the piano. At this late hour, those standing around the instrument looked liked they were using it for life support. Nick lowered his voice. "That slightly tipsy brunette in the red dress, see her? She's got her back to us now."

There was only one red dress. It was standing at a three-quarter angle from me, or, more accurately, listing. "On the tall side, on the buxomy side?"

"That's her, that's your girl."

I laughed. "Nick, you must be drunk. That is not Mrs. Seeberg."

"Oh yes it is. I met her once at a charity thing. That is her. Which is why she wasn't at Romanoff's. She was here all along."

Just then, Seeberg appeared, having snaked through the bunny hoppers and in through the door near the piano. He walked over to the woman in the red dress, kissed the back of her neck, and gently removed the glass from her hand. She pushed him away. Smiling and whispering into her ear, he dislodged her from the piano and began maneuvering her toward the door that Nick and I were blocking. I stepped aside. Helen Seeberg might have been pretty, but the look of pure hatred in her cold, brown eyes as she struggled against her husband was not pretty at all. His arm around her shoulders and still murmuring in her ear, Jack Seeberg swept by.

Barely flicking me a glance.

On the drive home, Nick and I established the following:

The wrong couple at the right table at Romanoff's most likely was the right couple after all. The description of the woman Nick had seen approximately fit the one who had presented herself at my desk.

That it was "a real good thing" Nick had gone into Romanoff's instead of me. "Because then you would have called the paper with the item and you would be one cooked goose."

That Nick's saving me from such a fate wiped out anything he might owe me for my dinner with Arthur.

"Which reminds me, kiddo, what *did* you find out?"

We were sitting in his car, with the heater blasting, in front of my house. I did not want to expose him again to Mrs. Keyes's permanent fumes. And I didn't want him to stay too long. I wanted to go to bed.

"As I told you," I began, lighting a cigarette and rolling down the window a crack. "Not much. The story line is that fortunes are won and fortunes are lost at Folkes's friendly little Sunday games, but not with any regularity. That is, a guy wins ten, twenty thousand, stays pretty even until maybe six months later, when he might win a few grand again."

"Okay."

"Only recently, that pattern has been changing. Gardiner Folkes himself has been on a tear. In two months he has won a quarter of a million dollars. He could be on a lucky roll, of course, but the thing is, he has never won big before. He's always been the gracious host who wins modestly and never loses more than a few bucks."

"So he's cheating."

"Arthur doesn't think so. He doesn't know why Folkes would cheat, he's got money, or how he could do it. They're always changing decks. And besides, another guy has been winning big, too. Larry Morton, the hotshot agent? You can't have two guys cheating with the same deck of cards, Arthur said."

"Well, someone is mad enough to have called the district attorney," Nick reminded me.

I yawned. "I just don't understand what this Mrs. Jack Seeberg business is all about. Why would someone who wasn't her pretend she was?"

"I'll help you grill her," Nick said eagerly.

Grill her was exactly what I had in mind when she called. She would call me this afternoon at the paper, wondering why the Romanoff's Item still had not appeared. Or maybe she would give it another day, phone on Monday. In any event, this girl would call. And then we would see.

We definitely would see.

"Your horoscope for today is . . .
"Your capacity for work is at an all-time high. Ask for more responsibility!"

6

Miss What's-her-name did not call on Sunday, though I kept the line free by using the phone on Nick's desk.

By ten-fifteen on Monday morning, the rest of the Society Department had drifted in. Abigail Longhorn, the gawky fashion editor who worked with her hat on, was the first to arrive. She nodded as she walked by. Theresa McKenzie, a chubby, gray-haired woman who went to parties and wrote purple prose about them, hurtled in next. "Bonjour!" she said. The editor of Society, Constance McPhee Estevez, a glamorous socialite who claimed marital links to some vague Chilean royalty, pulled up short at my desk.

"Dear, please have Etta phone me immediately. I must know why she didn't have the Hayworth item. And *Hedda* did."

Hedda had it all over Sunday's *Los Angeles Times*. Not only confirmation that the actress was seeking a divorce—that was bad enough—but a long teary interview telling why. The society editor, upon whose pages Etta's column ran, was understandably upset that Etta had been scooped. Etta would be suicidal.

"I mean twice in one week," Constance McPhee Estevez complained, pulling off her broad-brimmed hat and patting her carefully constructed bun. "You haven't forgotten that Tyrone Power thing, have you? My *dear*, we simply can't allow this in Society. Have you seen the *Times*'s circulation figures? They are climbing, climbing, climbing. Astronomically."

She said the word astro-*no*-mically, twilling the "no" in a high-pitched voice that threatened to shatter my coffee cup.

"Why at this rate, those horrid *Times* people are going to pillage every one of our readers."

"I think it's plunder," I said.

"All because of that fat little . . ." She took an indignant breath. "Get her on the phone!"And off she swept to her desk.

In truth, Constance McPhee Estevez, an exotic blonde of an uncertain age, was terrified of bulldoggish Etta Rice, who took orders from no one. Not even Mr. Hearst. Etta had, after all, written a glowing review of *Citizen Kane*, later explaining to her infuriated boss that she had no idea the film was supposed to be about him.

Constance had taken to communicating with Etta through me, which I found amusing. But at least she talked to me. It was no secret that I had not been a welcome addition to the staff. The *Examiner*, like the other papers in town, had lost reporters to the war effort and had filled those vacancies with new bodies, some of them females. Once the war was over, the GI's wanted their jobs back.

Papers, like other industries, were doing their best, adding staff, responding to a newly-energized economy and a mood of optimism, it was said, that hadn't been seen since before The Crash. But the journalism job market, always fiercely competitive, still hadn't caught up, and talented men, newly set adrift by the military, were hungry for work.

And I had been hired, for no good reason.

More than once, I had taken an Item over the phone, only to learn that the voice of Ronald Colman had in fact been the voice of someone over in News. Or Sports. I had learned to double check.

As the afternoon wound down, I began to wonder if the Seeberg fake had been just another practical joke.

On Tuesday, she phoned.

The call came in at ten-thirty, just as I was reading about the latest crime of "Jack the Snipper," the unknown assailant who grabbed young women on the street and cut off their hair. It was an exciting time to be in Los Angeles.

"It's Mrs. Seeberg," she said in a low mournful voice. Then, not waiting: "I was there, at Romanoff's. That was the deal, was it not?"

"That was the deal," I agreed.

"So?"

"Let's just say I need a little more information."

Skeptically . . . "What kind of information?"

"I'm a bit tied-up right now, Mrs. Seeberg. Perhaps you could stop by the office a little later?"

Panic crept into her voice. "No, no. I couldn't do that. I couldn't have this man see me go into the paper. He would tell my husband, don't you see?"

"Man?"

"I believe Jack's having me followed. *Somebody* is following me. Please, Miss Chandler, I need your help."

I began to smile. This lady might be cuckoo, but at least she was fun. The truth is, she was the most fun non-Item that had floated across my desk in weeks. And she didn't slam phones down. Besides, now I was frankly intrigued about her connection with Jack Seeberg. There had to be one somewhere.

I said, "How about this, Helen. We can meet at The Broadway downtown. Second-floor dresses. You can find me in one of the dressing rooms. That way you won't have to worry about the, uh, man. Say, about noon?"

The silence stretched so long, I wondered if she had fainted. Finally, I heard a soft laugh. "You're very clever, Miss Chandler, I like you. Noon it is." The phone went dead.

I arrived at The Broadway at eleven-thirty and bought a white silk suit. Then I settled into one of the dressing rooms, lit a cigarette and waited. The curtains parted at 12:03.

She was wearing a black wool dress with a rhinestone butterfly brooch pinned above her heart and a black hat with a veil falling across her face. Even through the veil I could see that her eyes looked tired. The brush strokes, however, had not faltered.

She hung a couple of dresses on a hook and sat down on the extra chair I had dragged in. She immediately lit a cigarette with a book of matches. I opened my purse and handed her the lighter she had left on my desk.

Neither of us had said a word.

I broke the silence. "Helen, we can't play this game any longer. Tell me the truth."

She reached for the glass ashtray, set it on a narrow wooden shelf and tapped an ash impatiently into it. "I told you, how many times do I have to tell you? And how come you weren't at Romanoff's like you said?"

"I sent someone in. He saw you."

She brightened. "He did? Then you are going to run it in the paper?"

"Well, it's not that easy. You see, shortly after my friend saw you at the restaurant, we ran into Mrs. Seeberg at a party up on Mulholland. You can understand my problem."

She just looked at me. Then she began to cry.

I didn't make a move. I let her stub out her cigarette, raise her veil, blow her nose and light another cigarette. She inhaled, closed her eyes and sighed deeply. "I'm sorry I lied to you, Miss Chandler. It was silly to think it would work."

Very silly, I thought. Except it nearly did.

"My name is . . . never mind. I am Jack Seeberg's mistress."

"Uh-huh."

"I have been for four years. He promised to marry me."

"Uh-huh."

"Only now he won't."

"Gee, I'm surprised."

"And I'm . . . with child."

"No."

"So I thought if I could make him think his wife was having an affair, he might, well, he might divorce her."

"You thought this up all by yourself?"

She nodded solemnly. A fat teardrop plopped onto her black wool bodice and melted.

"Did it ever occur to you that if I had printed the item, the real Mrs. Seeberg would have called the paper and screamed bloody murder? Not to mention bloody libel?"

She said nothing, just sat there blinking her eyes unrepentantly. "How old are you?" I asked.

"Twenty-two. And I . . . really love him." Sobs choked her.

She didn't look her age, but maybe it was the eyes. Somewhere along the line the sparkle had faded, until all that was left was a cold burning glow. She was the kind of animal that was always going to outsmart the other creatures in the jungle. Except just now, perhaps for the first time, she had stumbled on to one who was drawing blood and she couldn't run him down. I began to wish I had told her over the phone I knew she was a fake and had hung up and left it at that. My weapons were logic and sass. I didn't trust them for a minute against instinct and wits.

I reached over and took her hand. "Look, Miss . . ."

"Jones."

"Ye-ah. Have you told him?" She sniffled and nodded. "And what did he say?"

She withdrew her hand. She reached for her purse, rummaged through it and produced a compact. She began powdering her nose. "He said I should get an abortion. That filthy slime." She looked up from her mirror. "Can you imagine? I mean what does he think I am?"

Color had returned to her cheeks. That was a good sign. I liked the old "Mrs. Seeberg" better than the tearful "Miss Jones."

"I am not Prudence Penny," I said. Prudence Penny was our Advice to the Lovelorn columnist. "But this is what I would do, Miss Jones. I would tell Jack Seeberg to put you into a home for unwed mothers and to pay all of your expenses. If you really want this baby. Otherwise, have the abortion. He should be able to slip enough money under the table to get a good doctor to do it. Those are your choices. Marrying Jack Seeberg is not one of them."

She sat there very still, looking frightened and forlorn. I stood up. "You'll be all right. I'm sorry, I really have to go."

A small voice said, "You could have printed the item. She wouldn't have called."

I stopped. "Excuse me?"

"Mrs. Seeberg is having an affair."

I sat back down. She was putting the cigarettes and the lighter into her purse, not looking at me. "It's with Guy Van Gelder. He runs the dance studio on Dayton Way."

"Is that what Jack told you?"

"No. He doesn't know."

"And you do."

She lay the purse flat on her lap and finally looked at me. "One morning I drove over there. I was going crazy. He'd been in New York and he was supposed to be back but I hadn't heard from him. He won't let me call him at the office. So, I don't know, I just drove over to his house."

"Thinking you might see him."

"I parked on the street and after a while she came out in this black Pierce-Arrow and I followed her."

"Thinking she might be meeting him."

"She did some shopping first. She went into Geary's and then she went to the Beverly Wilshire for lunch. She ate in the coffee shop alone. Then she went to Guy's dance studio. She was in there from three o'clock to four-thirty."

"Maybe she was taking a rhumba lesson."

"Maybe. Only it seemed so quiet. It didn't seem like anything was going on in there. So I waited and after she left, I went in. There was a ballroom lesson at five and a lot of ladies showed up for that."

"Go on."

"I said a friend of mine, Mrs. Seeberg, had talked about Mr. Van Gelder's classes and I wanted to sign up for the one she was taking. The receptionist went through her card file and said there was no Mrs. Seeberg listed at the moment, although she thought a Mrs. Seeberg had been a student a while back. I said perhaps she had a private class. And the lady said Mr. Van Gelder didn't give private classes. Anyway, I followed her some more and I found out she visits the studio at that same time every Tuesday and Thursday. She always goes in the back door."

"Good for Mrs. Seeberg," I said. "I've got to run." I stood up again.

"Wait." She was on her feet, grabbing my arm. "Let me go first. I don't want him to see you."

"This man who is following you?"

"Yes, the private detective."

"What private detective?"

She shrugged and looked away. "Jack's, I guess."

"But why would Jack Seeberg be investigating you?"

She pulled the veil down over her face and gave me a tight little smile.

"You just don't know Jack at all," she said.

Wednesday was my day off. I slept late and didn't make it downstairs until well after noon. I was sitting at the kitchen table drinking Mrs. Keyes's criminally weak coffee, eating a half of grapefruit that even she couldn't ruin, and reading the afternoon papers. The big story on page one was the robbery at Mocambo the night before. A display of jewelry, worth $4917, had been stolen from a glass case, and so had $2736.75 in receipts. It was an after-hours job.

Also, the Commerce Department reported that per capita consumption of beef in the United States had been 150 pounds in 1946, the most in thirty-five years. A new cartoon strip was starting, something called Steve Canyon. And a late-breaking story in a small box on the front page related that an unidentified woman had been found shot to death early that morning near the Santa Monica pier, the third murder this year. It was January eighth. All the victims had been women.

One-thirty. I put down my cup and stood up. Hannah, my seamstress, was due in half an hour to alter a shipment of dresses my mother had impulsively bought for me. At three I was meeting her for tea. Possibly I could find out something about the Seeberg situation, but knowing my mother, with her narrow, almost naive view of the world, I doubted she could help me.

I had no plans for later. It was that kind of day.

Thursday was an entirely different kind of day.

Thursday I was reading the paper as Bret drove me to work. The story of the dead girl at the beach had grown bigger. In fact, it was the lead headline on the front page. NO DAY AT THE BEACH—WHO IS SHE? it said.

Apparently the girl had been found fully clothed and quite dead by a paperboy on a bicycle. He had been peddling south on Pacific Coast Highway delivering papers to the people who lived in the beach cottages, braving the fog that was swirling through the gray dawn. And then he had a flat. He dragged his bike off the road into a parking area, then seeing a kiosk on the beach just beyond, had walked over to it hoping to find a pay phone. Instead he found a body. Police said they could not identify the victim. They described her as being five-foot-four, 115 pounds, dark hair and hazel eyes.

"We don't know if the murders of the three female victims are related," commented the Santa Monica chief of police. "The first two were knifed to death. This one was shot in the chest with a hand gun, one .32-caliber bullet, full-metal jacket, lodged in the heart, fired at close range. She did not appear to be molested, or have struggled; there were no bruises."

She was believed to be in her mid-to-late twenties. She was wearing a black wool dress and was described as "a real beauty."

"She was wearing a black wool dress."

"What?" Bret said.

"Make a U-turn right here. We're going to the Santa Monica police station," I said.

This was not the most brilliant idea I ever had. Bret picked up on that immediately.

"If I were you I wouldn't tell them you're with a newspaper," he cautioned me. "Or you'll be sorry."

I stared at the back of his black cap, thinking how the description fit her, hazel eyes, dark hair, but thinking . . . no, then remembering her saying a man was following her. Sounding frightened.

"They'll think you know something, Miss Chandler. They'll lock you up in a room and grill you till the sun comes down."

"How would you know?"

"In the movies. They always grill you till the sun comes down."

We stayed on Olympic to Fourth Street in Santa Monica and took a left. The police station rose up from a broad grassy plaza, a two-story, stucco building, blindingly white, surrounded by tall, graceful palm trees with fronds that bent in the breeze. The clean January light gave the building a hard-edge, three-dimensional quality, as if the police station had been scissored out of its scenery and put down here like a cardboard stage set.

"Honestly, Bret. You should try to broaden yourself. Here." I tossed the *Examiner* onto the passenger seat as we rolled to a stop in front of the building. "Try Steve Canyon. I'll be right back."

The room they locked me in was closet-sized and smelly; the decor was gray. The walls were gray, the lineoleum was gray, and the metal table I was seated at was gray. The light bulb hanging down over the table had a gray metal collar around it. Only the iron bars over the window were not gray. They were black rust.

Sgt. Billy Beame was standing at the window staring out. The window was level with his face, and his hands were raised, gripping the iron bars. He looked like a man hoping to escape.

"I don't understand what he's doing," Sergeant Beame said. He looked over his shoulder at me. "What is he doing?"

"Who?"

"Your so-called driver out there. He's standing with his arm raised like the Statue of Liberty or some lunatic thing."

"I'm thirsty."

"Aw." He walked heavily back to the table and sat down. His dark eyes were set in a round, apple-cheeked face with a wide mouth and a couple of rows of piano teeth.

The teeth flashed. "Sorry. We don't serve high tea around here, or low tea, or even very good tea. So why don't we just go through this again, all right?"

"Sure."

"Swell." Beame pulled out a crumpled white handkerchief and wiped his face. It was about 110 degrees in the stuffy little room. But I wasn't going to take my wool suit jacket off. Or my hat. I opened my purse and pulled out my compact. I redid my lipstick and powdered my nose.

He sighed. He was probably in his early thirties, lots of muscle in the arms, decent-looking—they always are in this town—and wearing his regulation law-enforcement tan. We had been at it for nearly two hours, including the time-out to fingerprint me. That little exercise had come after a round of questioning in which Beame kept asking why I had killed her and had it felt good? I thought this funny at the time, but time had made me cranky. I suspected he would have to let me go soon. No self-respecting Santa Monica cop could risk two hours out of the sun.

"So. You come in here saying you want to identify this dead babe, right? Only how can you identify her, you don't know her name. Tell me that."

"She came to my office on Friday. She gave me a phony name. Why can't you let me see her? Maybe it's not the same girl and we're both wasting time."

"Your office."

"The *Los Angeles Examiner*, I told you."

"Right. The paper that sends its people out in chauffeur-driven cars." He got up and went back to the window. "What kind of car is that anyway?"

I didn't bother with a reply. He sat down again and gave me a hard look. "Your husband know you're here?"

"I doubt it. Can I see her now?"

"Oh, the independent sort, eh?" He grinned. "You do other things you don't tell your husband about?"

"Are you going to let me see her, Sergeant, or not?"

"Look, lady love. You say you don't know who this dame is. So you look at her puss. Then what? You still don't know who she is. You met her on Friday. Hey, whadda you care she's dead? Unless you know something. You got plans for tonight?"

I stood up. The air was fetid and I was beginning to feel faint. "I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what's got into me, coming here like this and taking up your time. Bothering you when you've got this horrible murder to solve. The pressure must be terrible. I'm really awfully sorry. Oh please don't get up, I'll see myself out."

I reached for the doorknob. He was behind me in a flash. "I said *unless* you know something," he rasped, breathing down my neck. "You know something?"

I turned slowly around. The big lug was about two inches from my face and reeking of Old Spice. I met his eyes. "Billy," I said softly, "I know many things. And if it's her, I'll whisper every single one of them right into your ear."

My words sent him back a step. He gave me the once-over, twice. He cleared his throat. "You won't like it. She ain't looking so good." He grinned. "You won't get sick, will you?"

"No." I opened my purse again and pulled out a small bottle of Chanel No. 5. I dabbed a drop behind each ear. "Ready?"

Santa Monica did not have a city morgue. It used the one in L.A. Bodies unfortunate enough to expire in Santa Monica were taken to a local mortuary and kept refrigerated until the county coroner could arrange transportation downtown. The particular body in question was still waiting to hitch a ride, Sergeant Beame explained to me.

It was waiting at the Twin Palms Funeral Home, two blocks away. Bret followed us in my car. Sergeant Billy drove with his arm on the back of my seat. We pulled up in front of a low concrete building on Third Street. It had a black front door but no front windows. There wasn't a palm tree in sight.

There was, however, a pay phone on the corner. I told Bret to call the office and tell Constance I should be there within an hour. Then I followed Beame into the building.

The large center foyer had a polished but severely scratched wooden floor covered with an imitation oriental rug. A gaudy crystal chandelier hung over the rug, and a man with a bad toupee stood in the doorway opposite, cleaning his teeth with a toothpick. Hurriedly he jammed the toothpick into the pocket of his black suit jacket and, pasting a frightening smile on his pale, jowly face, inquired if he could be of service to us.

"Sergeant Beame, Santa Monica P.D. We've come to look at the Jane Doe came in yesterday morning."

The man quickly put his smile away, seeing no reason to tire it out on a nonpaying customer. He pointed down a staircase, saying he supposed Sergeant Beame knew his way. I followed Beame down, then through a heavy metal door and into a large cold room reeking of what I supposed was formaldehyde. A thin, bald man wearing a droopy white coat was standing over a desk shuffling papers.

"Say, George, how's business? You got that Jane Doe around here somewhere?"

George straightened. "Unless she had to leave suddenly. Right this way, folks."

We walked to the rear of the room, past a cart with a dead body on it. It was a colored man, naked except for a white tag attached to his big right toe. His oval face was smooth and waxen. My stomach turned over.

We had reached the back wall. George opened a wide metal door behind which had been built a vertical row of three square drawers. He tugged open the one in the middle. Sergeant Billy squeezed my right elbow, muttering, "Pretend she's sleeping. Just one quick look, that's all you need."

George drew back the sheet.

For some reason they had left her eyes wide open. And her mouth was open, too, as if she had died screaming. Drops of caked blood, almost black now, coated her lips, and her hair was a tangled mess. Her skin had taken on a translucent greenish cast, as if lighted by a candle inside in her head. But other than that, her face was perfect, not a mark or a smudge on it. Whatever mess the bullet had made going into her was hidden by the sheet. Red-painted toenails peeked out at the end. I kept my eyes on her a minute longer. She didn't look dead. She looked trapped in time between waking from a bad dream and falling into a nasty hangover. I could feel Beame's eyes boring into me.

I turned to him, tugging my elbow free. "It's not her. Can we go?"

"You sure? That's not the dame came into your office?" His tone said he didn't believe me.

My stomach hit the floor and seemed to be making the climb back up. "I don't know who she is . . . please."

We walked out into the too-bright January sunlight, automatically slipping our sunglasses on. Bret was standing at the curb, lounging against the Bentley. Apparently he was through reciting *Henry IV* for the day. I took a lungful of air and felt my knees begin to shake.

"You okay?" said Sergeant Billy, finding another excuse to grab my arm.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm going now." I lurched toward the car.

"Hold it, cookie. You say that's not her?"

"That's right." I kept walking. "Sorry I wasted your time."

He grabbed my arm from behind and spun me around. His mouth was a hard straight line, a slash of brown crayon across a tan page. The line moved. "Maybe we'll just stay in touch. Case you suddenly remember that it's her, see? 'Cause I don't know if I believe you, sugar." He tilted my chin up. "What do you think of that?"

I forced a smile. "Sure."

"Good." He showed me his gleaming teeth. "You'll be hearing from me."

He released my arm. I continued walking carefully toward the car. Bret whipped the door open. I started to get in.

"Hey!"

Sergeant Beame was standing there, hands on his hips, eyes hidden behind the dark glasses.

"What kinda car is that, anyway?"

7

I arrived at the *Examiner* just before two.

A visibly exasperated Nick was slumped behind his desk, phone jammed between his ear and shoulder, scribbling furiously on a piece of copy paper. At the same time, athletic fellow that he was, he managed to shoot me a spiteful look as I dropped my purse on my desk and headed back to the Home Cooking Department. My legs were still shaking. I put the kettle on the stove, and when the water was boiling, a tea bag in a chipped white cup that someone had stowed in one of the cabinets. Remembering the old bromide that sugar cures nausea, I added an extra cube to my tea. Thinking: *What hadn't she told me?*

The blinds over the long row of windows in the newsroom, looking down on Broadway, were raised now, the morning glare having moved on. I stood in the doorway sipping my tea. Men in shirt-sleeves were hunched over their typewriters, beating out sentences, or slumped against high-backed wooden chairs, reading through clip files. Ripped pages of newspapers and old photographs formed puddles at their feet. I followed the paper trail back to the far wall where, under an enlarged pinup of Jane Russell, the copy desk stood.

I could smell Walter Ainsley before he could see me.

He was bent over the desk, working the *Examiner* crossword puzzle, white sleeves rolled up his muscular arms just far enough to display the tattoos; the Marine insignia on his left bicep, the word MOTHER on his right. After that, if you cared to notice Walter, you would see a tall bulky man with a light brown crew cut and dark, penetrating eyes—when they were not bloodshot. He was tapping the eraser end of a pencil on the desk, apparently stuck on some esoteric Across.

"Hello."

Walter glanced up. "Oh, hi, Paris. Pull up a chair."

Six desks had been pushed together in a horseshoe to form the copy desk. I sat down at the desk beside his. "I hear you were sick over the weekend. Are you okay?"

Walter tapped his pencil on the newspaper. "Amazonian reptile, nine letters. What do you think?"

"I think you're not okay."

He dropped the pencil and gazed at me. "What's that you're drinking, tea? Tea will kill you. Lots of people die of tea every year and don't even know it. They think they've died of a heart attack."

"Thanks." The bottom drawer of Walter's desk was open slightly and I could see the brown paper bag.

"So now . . . hang on a minute, Paris."

The city editor, Fred Dickinson, arrived and handed Walter several typewritten pages. "Everything's here but it's rough," he said. "At the moment it's our lead story, page one," and he walked away. Walter read the first few paragraphs, shaking his head.

"The Mocambo robbery. The kid should be talking to fences, not the LAPD mouthpiece. Know what I mean?" He looked at me.

"I don't know about any of that."

"Yeah." He grabbed a pack of Camels off the desk but it was empty. He crumpled the packet and shot it into the wastebasket. He leaned back in his chair.

"So what juicy little scandal are you exposing today? Wait, let me guess. It's Thursday. Thursdays are born-out-of-wedlock days, or is that Sundays? Yeah. Sundays. So people can run to church and confess. I guess today must be trouble-on-the-studio-lot day."

I smiled. "Thursday is Paris-has-got-herself-into-a-sort-of-jam day. What time are you getting off work?"

"Once we put the six o'clock baby to bed, I'll be heading over to Musso and Frank's. You want to meet me, I'll be at the bar."

"Okay." I picked up his pencil, leaned toward him and filled in fifty-seven across. I stood up.

"Aw, go on," Walter said.

"Amazonian reptile, nine letters. It fits."

"A big snake?" Walter said.

I gave him a wink and wandered back to face the wrath of Nick Goodwin, who must have been reeled in from the beach, or wherever it was that he allegedly did his work, to man the phones while I was "delayed." When I got back to Society, three pages of carelessly typed Items were on my desk, attached to a scrawled note: "Screening and starlet at three. Yours, Nick."

I glared at his vacant desk.

On cue, the phones began to ring at once.

I don't know how Walter Ainsley and I became friends, or even, in truth, if we were friends. I had no idea, for example, where he lived, or where he had been born, or how, exactly, he came to work at the *Examiner*. He was thirty-six, had fought under General MacArthur in the Pacific and had been rewarded, if that is the right word, with a Navy Cross, a Silver Star, and a Purple Heart with a gold star.

Before the war, Walter owned the reputation as the best crime reporter in L.A. No one ever beat Walter on a story, often not even the police. More than once, the accounts went, Walter would finish typing a story, grab the phone, call the police and tell them to meet him at such and such an address. Once the arrest was made, Walter would collect his quotes and phone them in to top off his previously written story. Then he would head over to Leary's Bar on Fifth and Figueroa and tip off his rivals at the other papers. He knew that even if they hustled and got their stories into the same edition as his, they couldn't match his information. And by tipping them off, by allowing them the time to get something into print, he was saving them their jobs.

"Don't kid yourself, hotshot," he once said to me. "I just didn't want those guys replaced by someone better than me."

Some people swore the reason he was able to scoop with such stunning regularity was not that he had better police sources than anybody else, although he did, but that Walter Ainsley possessed a criminal mind.

Something happened to that mind in the Pacific. Whatever he went through between 1941 and 1945—and he was never known to speak of those years—he returned to the paper a different man: undependable, sloppy in his work habits, drunk.

Six months after resuming the crime beat, he was pulled in and reassigned to desk duty, charged with rewriting other reporter's stories. Which is where I encountered him at ten o'clock on one of my first nights at the paper, when I came bursting in with a firsthand report of Mrs. Leticia Arbruster's Fourth of July party at which Betty Grable threw a drink in Lauren Bacall's face, and Bacall threw horseradish in her's.

I had less than half an hour till deadline, could barely type and didn't know how to write a story. Walter sat me down, rolled two pieces of paper into his typewriter and told me to "just spill it, kid" as his fingers flew over the keyboard, and he never once treated me as anything but a seasoned professional.

On this night, he was holding court down at the far end of the bar at Musso's, glass in one hand, gesturing broadly with the other. He was surrounded by a pack of his colleagues, city hall and police reporters and a couple of men from the mayor's office. There were no women at the bar and I didn't want to start a commotion by burrowing in. So I walked back to the entrance of the restaurant and asked Jesse if he would tell Walter I was here. After a while, he came strolling out, grinning.

"Hey, Paris, come have a drink with the boys. We won't bite."

"Couldn't I just have a drink with you? At a table. Please, Walter."

"Sure kid. Jess, you got a table we can have? Whatsa matter, you don't look so good."

"I saw a dead body today. I don't feel so good."

Walter stopped grinning. "Hey, Jess, come on. What kinda joint you running here?"

Tiny Jesse grabbed a couple of menus and led us to a booth in the front of the dining room, away from the bar. "Actually, two bodies," I said over Walter's shoulder. "How could you do this for a living?"

"Sit down, Paris. Jess, bring us two scotches. You want water with yours?"

"Yes, please."

I doubt Musso's had changed in a hundred years. It had opened in 1919, not long after Hollywood invented itself, and due to its central location among the studios, and its proximity to the NBC radio building, it had always been a lunch and after-hours haunt for writers, producers, directors, and movie executives. And reporters from the *Times* and the *Examiner* were only a twenty-minute ride away. We all knew the table once frequented by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which was next to the one Charlie Chaplin liked best, which was on the other side of the room from where Garbo had one of her first lunches in Hollywood. Etc. Normally my eyes wandered restlessly when I came here, but tonight the Marx Brothers could have been at the next table and I wouldn't have noticed, so intent was I on telling Walter what had happened.

"And he didn't sound like he believed me at all." I put down my glass, which I had been holding, even though it was quite empty, and said, "What do I do now?"

"Have another drink."

"I don't want another drink."

Walter stuck out his arm and grabbed a passing waiter and ordered two more scotches. "Shouldn't be that difficult to break the story. 'Course the big problem is finding out who the broad is."

"What?"

"I know how the police operate. They got two other stiffs on their hands, with names. They'll follow those up first. After a while, Miss La Doe will be forgotten, unless some relative comes forth and puts the pressure on. The only problem for you is if they catch the murderer of one of the other two and he confesses he killed all three, see what I mean?"

Two more scotches made bumpy landings on the wooden table.

"Walter, I lied to a policeman today. I don't know why I lied. I just did. Now I think I better tell him the truth, don't you? Only if I do, will they punish me?"

"Somehow we got to find out who this Miss X was. You say she was attractive? An actress maybe, a model?"

"I don't think you heard me."

"I would try SAG first. Lots of people who work are registered with the Screen Actors Guild. They have pictures and little biographies. 'Course, you'd have to go through a hell of a lot of folders, but—"

"Just a minute," I cut in.

". . . The other thing is, go to the big talent agencies first. William Morris, those outfits." He turned toward me. "Gee, this is great, Paris."

I drained the second scotch. I said, "Order me another one and listen, Walter. I don't care who she is, exactly. I mean I did, but now I don't. I lied to a policeman. Let them find out who she is. Do you think I should call Sergeant Beame at home?"

Walter shook a cigarette out of his pack, lit it with a match and leaned back in the booth. He drew his lips together and blew out a double smoke ring, watching its lazy progress as it fluttered up over the head of a man with a monocle at the next table. Walter chuckled. "Yeah. Sergeant Beame."

"Do you know him?"

"Jesus Christ."

He turned toward me, shifting his elbow up on the back of the booth. I could feel those brown eyes boring in. I glanced away.

"Listen, Paris. Are you listening? You're working for a newspaper, girl. The purpose of which is to break stories. That's lesson one. Lesson two. There's a circulation war on, in case you haven't heard. That means you are ethically and professionally bound to seek scoops. Seek and ye shall find. Ye don't seek, the *L.A. Times* will. That's Walter's psalm. Here, have a cigarette."

"But Walter, I don't want to break this story. I really don't. What I want is to go home now and sink way down in the bathtub."

Walter grinned as he lit my cigarette. "So break the story in your bathtub."

I smoked the cigarette and said nothing. Over at the bar, Raymond Caro disengaged himself from the crowd and headed for the door, en route, I imagined, to his radio show. *Hollywood and Vine.*

"Look, Paris. What the hell are you doing at the paper? You ever stop to think about that? As far as I can see, you're just waltzing around wearing fancy clothes and waiting for some Jake to marry you. Am I right?"

I started on the third scotch.

"Okay. There's nothing wrong with that. Marry some rich guy, raise kids, hire help, fire the help, play a little bridge on Thursdays, flirt with the grocer on Fridays, have an affair. Who's to say you shouldn't go that route? Maybe you'll get your picture in the *Saturday Evening Post*."

"You're saying I shouldn't."

"Yeah."

"Why?" As soon as I said it, I knew I shouldn't have. "Forget it," I said.

Walter waved to someone across the room. Then, raising his glass, he said, "Churchill had a great line today. He was complaining that the Labor Government is spending too much of the American loan on American tobacco and movies. He said the British Empire should be able to produce its own vices."

I stubbed out one of mine. "All right," I said. "Tell me."

"Because most people don't have choices, Paris. Men take jobs where they can get them and hope that down the line they can advance. Girls marry the men with the jobs because it never occurs to them they can do something else. You fall into something else but you can't see the possibilities. Well right now you are sitting on one hell of a possibility and I think you're a little fool if you turn your back on it, *that* is what I think."

I shook another cigarette out of Walter's pack. The restaurant was jammed now with people from the studios. I wanted to go home, badly.

"I'll think about it," I said without much conviction.

"Fine," Walter said. "You do that."

His jacket was rumpled, his tie askew; there was a brown stain on the front of his shirt. He was unreliable, boozy, crazy. I was crazy to have come to him for advice. I stared into my empty glass. I said, "Just supposing I did this, would you help me?"

He began to fuss with his tie, straightening the knot. "Maybe. Maybe not." He signaled for the check.

"Where are you going?" I said, starting to panic.

"Over to the Blue Angel." He slapped a five-dollar bill on the table and reached for his hat. "It ain't your kind of place."

When I got home, Mrs. Keyes told me that Sgt. Billy Beame had phoned. "Wanted to know your whereabouts. But I wouldn't tell him."

"You didn't know," I pointed out. "Now I am going upstairs. Would you bring me some soup?"

"He said he'd call back." Her tone was defiant.

"Tomato soup, chicken noodle. Something bland. Please."

She looked at me, hands on hips, blue eyes flashing.

I sighed. "Look, it was nothing. Nothing happened, Mrs. Keyes. I'm okay, Bret is okay, the car is okay. We, he, was just going too fast. I'd like some crackers, too, if you would."

She arched a skeptical brow. "In Santa Monica?"

"And if he calls back, just say I haven't come in. Better yet, if the phone rings, don't answer it."

I ate the soup sitting cross-legged on the foot of my bed, lights off, staring out the open window into the black night. The lights were on in the house across the street and a gentle breeze filled the room with the sweet scent of eucalyptus. Somewhere far away, a dog was barking.

Shortly after ten, the phone rang. It rang seven times.

Then it stopped.

"Do not be lured into bad purchases by false advertising."

8

The Screen Actors Guild had its offices on Hollywood Boulevard, in a lovely art-deco building a block west of the Chinese Theater. I left Bret at the curb and walked into the lobby. The floor was gray marble and so were the walls, a sign perhaps that the architect had run out of creative options, until he reached the ceiling, which he arched. The directory beside the twin elevators located SAG on the third floor. I went up.

The elegance of the lobby apparently rose only so far. I stepped out onto black and white linoleum crusted with grime. The walls were white, or had been. At each end of the short corridor an office door stood open. The one I wanted was to the left.

Several feet inside the office I was physically stopped by a waist-high wooden wall that ran the width of the room. Seated at a desk behind it, like a soldier manning the barricades, was a young man in a white shirt and narrow black tie. He was listening to "Zip-a-Dee Doo-Dah" on the radio, a song that I loathed but which refused to budge from the top of the charts, and keeping time by snapping his gum. Behind him lay a good-sized room rimmed by high green filing cabinets. Near the back, three wooden desks jutted into the room in parallel formation, pencil sharpeners all lined up in a row. Two more desks were stationed nearer the counter. One was occupied by a young woman flipping through a stack of folders. Nobody was home at the other four desks.

"If you're here to join or something, you got to come back," the gum snapper said belligerently. "No new members between twelve and one."

The big wooden clock on the back wall said it was 12:17. I had slipped out on my lunch hour, egged on by Walter's scorn of the night before. Childishly, I had decided I'd show him. Showing him by performing this little job didn't seem all that taxing.

I flashed my press card. "I'm doing a story and I was hoping you could help me."

Mr. Juicy Fruit tapped his pencil to the music's beat. "It depends."

I wondered if it depended on his propelling himself up out of his chair and walking the five feet over to the counter where I stood. I said, "It's about girls who come to Hollywood to make it in the movies. I would like to go through your files to get names of girls I might interview."

"Yeah? How you gonna do that?" Snap, snap. "The files are alphabetical."

Abruptly, he reached over and twisted the knob of his radio. The volume rose. The room was suddenly shaken by Berlin's "Blue Skies." He closed his eyes and began crooning. I dropped my press card into my purse. The woman with the files never looked up.

I slid into the back seat of the Bentley. The same song was on the car radio. Bret was drumming his fingers on the tan leather steering wheel and bobbing his head.

I broke into his musical moment. "What's the quickest way to find an actress in this town? I mean somebody whose name you don't know."

"Any bar stool," said Bret. "At Romanoff's."

"Excuse me?"

He turned around. "After five o'clock. That's where the moguls go, that's where the actresses go."

I closed my eyes. I was beginning to get a headache. "Bret," I said, speaking very slowly, "if the dead girl was an actress, how could I find out her name? Where could I go to find pictures of actresses, and don't tell me Hollywood Dry Cleaners."

"The Academy," said Bret. "They have directories. If you've been in a movie, they put you in the directory. But you have to be a member of SAG. And you have to pay. Fifteen dollars a year."

I smiled. After ten months, Donald Martin Bret Bigalow had finally been of meaningful service to me. Next we would be rocketing men to the moon. "To the Academy," I sang. "Quickly."

He switched on the engine, but he didn't make the car go.

I waited. He opened the glove compartment and whipped out a Hostess Twinkie. Space travel had just been set back.

"You'll be wasting your time, Miss Chandler. But if you want to go, we'll go." He sighed heavily.

Right at the base of my neck. That's where the headache was starting.

"You have a directory at your office," Bret said, ripping into the cellophane. "I saw one on Nick Goodwin's desk."

After dinner I asked Mrs. Keyes to build a fire in the study and to bring me a cup of tea. I slipped into a pair of black silk lounging pajamas and curled up in the overstuffed red leather chair to the left of the fireplace. The study was my favorite room in the house. Wood-paneled and cozy, it had been designed for Russ to smoke his pipe in. The fireplace wall and the wall opposite had been fitted with bookshelves and they held volumes that reflected his eclectic preoccupations: medieval history, Renaissance theater, all of Mark Twain, and shelves of first-edition children's books that contained original hand-printed drawings. He also collected books on airplanes and the numerous cases of Sherlock Holmes. Plus, being a Chandler, he had kept oversized scrapbooks containing the front pages of newspapers from Bangkok to Berlin.

Between these two walls, running across the back of the room, were leaded windows bordered by cushioned window seats. In front of the windows stood a Queen Anne desk with a dark green leather top. A silver tray occupied a corner of the desk and held a 1908 bottle of Chateau de Laubade Armagnac, never opened. Completing the furnishings were a couch against the wall opposite the fireplace and a small glass coffee table. I put a Puccini recording on the phonograph and began thumbing through *The Players' Directory*.

The book was oversized, nine by twelve inches, with thick oatmeal cardboard covers and 665 pages in between. Each of those pages contained up to eight photographs of actors or actresses, the studio to which they were under contract, and their agent. The section for actresses was divided into leading ladies, ingenues, characters, and comediennes. They were listed alphabetically.

At nine o'clock, I turned off the phonograph and switched on the radio to listen to Meredith Wilson.

Just as the doorbell rang.

Sgt. Billy Beame strode into the study trailed by a nerve-addled Mrs. Keyes.

"Good evening," he said formally.

He was not in uniform. He was wearing a sort of imitation zoot suit, a brown pinstriped affair with extra-wide shoulders, even wider lapels, and pants with narrow cuffs. Why he chose a brown shirt and yellow tie with pineapples on it I did not ask. He was also wearing a gallon of Old Spice. He removed his brown fedora. I wondered if he policed as badly as he dressed.

"Why, Sergeant," I said, "what a surprise. Come in. Mrs. Keyes, bring me a robe and then a service of tea. I would like another cup, and I'm sure our guest would be grateful for something hot on such a chilly night. Sergeant, come closer to the fire, your face is red with cold."

His face was red with embarrassment. We were on my territory now, and I was going to make him feel as uncomfortable here as he had made me feel at the police station. Mrs. Keyes wasn't moving. "My robe," I repeated. "I'm sure the sergeant did not mean to catch a young lady in her pajamas."

He turned redder. Mrs. Keyes, her blue eyes wide with curiosity, backed out of the room reluctantly.

I indicated the couch and invited Beame to have a seat. I returned to the red leather chair. He did not sit down but stayed where he was, standing in the middle of the Persian rug.

"She's not in there," he said flatly.

"Who is not where?"

"The girl. She's not in *The Players' Directory,* I've checked."

I glanced at the book, forming a shingle over the arm of the chair. "What girl?"

"Your friend at the mortuary." He gave me a hard look, then cut it with a grin. "You always dress like this?"

I brought my hand up to my throat self-consciously. "Only when I'm expecting company."

"And who are you expecting, Mrs. Chandler?"

"I go by Miss Chandler. And it's none of your business." I opened the rectangular silver box on the small glass table beside me and fingered a cigarette. He lurched forward, flicking open a lighter. I said, "Please sit down, Sergeant. You're making me nervous."

"I seem to have that effect on women." He leered.

Mrs. Keyes hurried in with my bathrobe. I almost giggled. Instead of the black and red Chinese silk robe, she delivered a bulky pink flannel thing, the kind that grandmothers give their grandchildren, which is how I got mine. I stood and slipped it on.

Mrs. Keyes looked at Beame unhappily. "I'll be right back with the tea."

"It's not necessary. I won't be staying." He sat down anyway.

"That will be all, Mrs. Keyes."

As soon as she'd closed the door, though not all the way, Beame said, "Yeah I went through that book, too. Plus the others for 1946 and the ones from '45. Spent most of the afternoon at it. It seems our girl was not an actress. Or at least not an employed one."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like some tea?"

"Interesting reading, though, I thought."

I yawned. "Maybe for you. But I'm only on the G's and my eyes are crossed. Frankly, I hate doing research. Do you like doing research?"

"What kind of research are *you* doing?"

I hesitated. "Perhaps I'd best not tell. Who knows, Sergeant? You might be a spy for the *L.A.Times.*" I smiled.

He smiled back. "Your cigarette's gone out, Miss Chandler. Here."

He tossed his lighter over to me. It landed in my lap. I picked it up and studied it for a moment. Then I put it down on the glass table. I said, "So what can I do for you? Or is this a social visit?"

"We still don't know her name." His tone was sharp.

"What a shame."

"Yeah. It's the craziest thing. For instance, there was no car. You find an abandoned car, you check the plates. You get a name. But no car. Girl on the beach, how'd she get there?"

"Maybe she got a ride," I offered. "Or maybe she lived nearby."

"Right. But then she's got no ID on her, isn't that odd?"

"Not really. Maybe she lived nearby and went out for a walk. Sometimes I go for a walk. I don't take a purse."

"She took a purse."

I picked up the lighter and slowly lit a new cigarette. I said, "And you found the purse?"

"Maybe twenty feet away. Navy leather bag. Expensive looking. But no label. Do you take the labels out of your purses, Miss Chandler?"

I exhaled. "No."

"Anyway, what's in the purse? There's a compact and a lipstick. Flaming Ruby. A comb, a handkerchief. No initials. There's a key, could fit any door in the city. A silver cigarette case. Half a pack of Winstons. And a silver lighter. Also two dollars and some change. No wallet, no ID."

"I'm sure something will turn up," I remarked.

His eyes left me and did a turn around the room. Eventually they swung back to me. "You live here alone, Paris?"

I blinked and then I stubbed out the cigarette. Something was coming and I didn't know what. I said, "I have help."

"Your application card at the paper says you're a widow."

I looked at him coolly. "You've been investigating me. Do you think I'm the killer, Sergeant?"

"I wasn't born that lucky, lady." He sounded sour. He shifted on the couch and I caught a glimpse of hairy leg where his brown sock ended. "What I think is that you know something. What I know is that you'd be wise to clue me in."

"Haven't we been through this before? I believe we have.

I do not know who the girl was and I have no idea how she died. I'm tired, Sergeant. Can we say good night?"

Beame got to his feet. "Ah, but Paris, there was one thing you knew about this girl, wasn't there? You knew she smoked cigarettes. You knew she used that lighter. The lighter on the table. Funny you forgot to mention it."

I picked up the lighter and then I stood up. I walked over to Beame and handed it back to him. "Is this a trick, Sergeant? I don't like tricks. I don't like men who do."

He held onto my hand.

"Everything in the purse was dusted for prints. The lighter had yours, as well as Jane Doe's, all over it. It's from Brahm's, cost a hundred bucks. Now maybe you bought it, lost it. She found it. But Brahm's has no record of you purchasing a lighter, and they keep those kinds of records. So maybe somebody bought it, gave it to you for a present. What do you think?"

I pulled my hand away and rubbed it. "I think this is a very complicated case. For instance, in the last week alone, I have probably lit heaven knows how many cigarettes, with heaven knows how many lighters. It's like a contagion. So many people touching other people's lighters, infecting them with fingerprints."

Beame dropped the lighter into his jacket pocket. "Let's just hope we don't have to put you in quarantine, Miss Chandler. Good night."

I turned the radio back on and listened to the rest of Meredith Wilson. It annoyed me that Beame had caused me to miss the first twenty minutes. When the show ended, I flicked off the radio and went to the phone in the hallway. I called my father and said I needed a favor. He said *The Thin Man* had just come on and couldn't this wait? I told him all I wanted to know was if he could borrow from MGM the last four or five films that Jack Seeberg had directed. He mumbled, yeah, he'd try to get them in the morning. I thanked him and hung up.

Then I phoned the paper and asked for Walter Ainsley's home number. When I called, he didn't answer. I said good night to Mrs. Keyes and went up to bed.

It took me a long time to fall asleep.

* * *

My father had left the film canisters in the Screening-slash-Family Room, along with a note informing me that he and my mother had taken off for Palm Springs, and could I please see that the films got returned to his secretary on Monday morning? This I discovered when I arrived at the house Saturday afternoon, Bret in tow. I thought he might like to watch movies; he could also run the projector.

"This is neat!" Bret exclaimed, as he pushed a button on the wall and the projector rose up out of the terra-cotta floor tiles in the back of the room. He had already pushed the button that lowered the screen in the front of the room. By late afternoon, he was less enthused. The two war films we had viewed were clunkers both.

Bret switched off the projector. "It's five o'clock," he announced. He put on his jacket and headed for the door.

"You're leaving?"

"Actually, it's 5:04."

Right. I had forgotten. Bret had every other Saturday night off. Starting at five. I supposed my parents' housekeeper could drive me home. I said good night to Bret and went over and looked at some of the books on my father's shelves. Nothing grabbed me.

Last night, it had seemed logical to look at the films Seeberg had directed since 1943, the year Miss X said she had met him. Walter's suggestion that she might have been an actress also made sense; there was something practiced about the way she held her head and used her hands. And her theatrics had been impressive. Then again, it was possible she was not an actress and had never met Jack Seeberg in her life.

I knew only a little about him. That before the war, he had made a number of highly-acclaimed movies, including two that earned him Academy Award nominations, *Downtown USA* and *Letter to a Rube*. Then, like many filmmakers who stayed in Hollywood, he turned his efforts to making propaganda movies, none of which was terribly good. Now, it appeared, he had his rhythm back. His first postwar picture, released in 1946 and called *Unscrupulous Love,* had done well at the box office. He was forty-two-years old and—hungry.

I stared out the window at the darkening hills that rose up in the distance and thought about how he had approached me at the party, here, just the week before. Feeling so undone by him, then feeling disappointed when he said his name. Oh, right, Jack Seeberg; uh-huh. A director with a roving hand and a drunken wife, possibly a pregnant girlfriend. Making eyes at me. Forget it, pal . . . I was intrigued.

I suddenly felt out of sorts. I felt that way for a while and then I came up with a cure. Or was it? I roamed around the deserted first floor debating whether I should actually pick up the phone and do it.

At the phone table in the center hall, I opened the drawer, found a slug and dropped it into the coin box. It was one of my mother's endearing qualities, I supposed, refusing to switch to an automatic dialing phone. Perhaps the old one made her feel young.

When the operator came on, I gave her the number at the paper and waited to be put through.

"Etta Rice's confessional. Father Nick Goodwin speaking."

I hesitated. "Did you know it was me? You can't possibly answer the phone that way."

"Say, Paris. What's up?"

"I'm at my parents' house, watching Jack Seeberg films. Nobody's here. The films are lousy. I thought maybe . . ."

There was a long silence. "Oh," he said.

"I'll even . . . cook."

"Uh, look, Paris—"

"All right. I won't cook. We can order in. . . ."

"I've got a date."

I stood there playing with the cord. "Come on, Nick. You can do better than that."

"Okay. I'd love to come up there and watch Jack Seeberg films with you, I really would. Except that . . . why are you watching Jack Seeberg films?"

"Long story. New twist. Who's your date?"

Another silence followed. "I can't dump her, Paris. But I could . . . bring her. Actually, you'd like her. She's . . ."

The receiver was two inches from crashing onto its cradle when I suddenly reversed its course.

"Listen," I said quickly, "you can stop at Mr. Woo's on the way up. But make sure they put in the fortune cookies, Nick. Because I go crazy when they forget. I really do."

* * *

I was not prepared for Nick's date. I was prepared to be jealous of Nick's date, though I couldn't begin to think why I should bother. What came in through the front door with Nick was not the usual tremulous, wide-eyed, blonde bombshell with the regressive IQ. Uh-uh. This was a five-foot-ten-inch redhead who marched right in, shook my hand firmly, and drawled, "Honey, you got a fork? I'm about half dead from hunger."

While Nick, smiling self-consciously, stumbled in behind her, juggling two bulging brown bags.

"Paris," he announced. "Meet Theodora Jones."

"You'd do better to call me Tee," she declared.

Tee was wearing a full-length black wool cape, which she proceeded to let fall to the floor, to reveal skin-tight black velvet toreador pants and a white cotton peasant blouse, cut, surprisingly, not nearly as low as Nick might have liked. Her large feet were encased in high-heeled black pumps. Her red hair cascaded in flaming ripples down to her waist.

Nick, still working on formalities, said, "Tee, this is Paris Chandler."

Tee stepped over her cape. "We'll get friendly later. You got a kitchen in this joint?"

We sat on the floor in the Family Room and went through all of the cartons, tossing aside the wooden chopsticks in favor of serious metal eating utensils. Nick and I drank Manhattans; Tee would only hear of beer. They did most of the eating. I, meanwhile, told Nick of my meeting with Miss X at The Broadway, impulsively deciding not to tell him the rest. I didn't want him taking charge. Tee watched me with wide root-beer brown eyes but said nothing.

"So I've looked at two films already," I continued, fishing through the wax-paper bag with the fortune cookies in it. "I've got three others. I'm hoping this girl will be in one of them."

"Now that you've examined them all, why don't you just open one," said Nick.

Tee picked up a napkin and blotted her mouth. "'*The man of your dreams has been there all along; take heed,*'" I read.

Nick shot me a look.

"Just kidding." I cleared my throat. "'*You are about to come into a large sum of money.*'"

"Exactly what you need," said Nick.

I crumpled the paper, tossing it onto the coffee table. Then I stood up. "Ready for movies, kiddies?"

A third of the way into *Heartline,* our little ingenue appeared on screen. She opened the door of a brothel and purred, "Hello, precious. You got the time?" That was it. After the last reel, we went back and rolled the credits and I wrote down the names of all the actresses listed. I would check the names in *The Players' Directory* and hope to identify the mystery corpse by process of elimination.

The alternative was to get lucky. To spot her in another film and find the same name in the credits. I studied the two canisters to go, *Lydia London* and *Ship-to-Shore,* debating. Nick came up behind me.

"I think we'd better go. I promised Tee I'd get her home early."

"Believe it or not, I work tomorrow," drawled Tee.

She stood up and shook her red hair.

"Me, too," said Nick stiffly.

I looked at Tee. "What kind of work do you do?"

"Mainly odd jobs for people." She drained her beer glass. "Stuff people don't want to bother with. You know."

I glanced at Nick. He shrugged. "Why don't we take you down the hill, drop you off?"

"Thanks, but I'd like to plow through one more film. Helga can drive me home, she's in her room. Or I'll spend the night." I smiled. "I'm really glad you came."

I walked them to the door. Tee bent over and retrieved her cape from the floor. We all shook hands. Nick said he'd call. I stood on the portico and watched them drive away.

It was a cold, clear night. The wind had come up and was rattling the trees. But the stars were bright. Across Mulholland Drive I could see occasional lights blinking in the Valley. Off to the west, shining brightly, were the lights of the Clark Gable ranch. It almost made the Valley respectable. But I still considered it a rough and uninviting outpost, a sort of French Guyana for L.A. outcasts.

I turned toward the house. When Russ went off to war I rarely felt lonely; there were so many people like me. Now loneliness had become a habit. I couldn't seem able to break it.

Back in the study, I tossed the food cartons into the paper bags. I swept the fortunes up off the coffee table and read each one. There were five. I began to laugh. All had identical messages. "*The man of your dreams has been there all along; take heed.*"

Nick Goodwin never missed a trick.

9

"Her name was Anne Bardon, but she was born April Babich. From Ames, Iowa," I told Walter Ainsley.

It was three o'clock Monday afternoon. We were having what Walter called breakfast at The Pantry downtown. What he called breakfast was a three-egg omelet, hash browns, a steak, a pile of toast, two glasses of orange juice, and unlimited coffee. I ate toast and watched him pick at his food. Walter always thought he was famished and ordered enough for a regiment, then forgot to eat most of it.

"I found her in two of Seeberg's movies. She spoke one sentence in *Heartline*, and sang in a chorus line in *Ship-to-Shore*. You should be proud of me. I phoned MGM this morning and got the casting department and asked for the names of the girls in the chorus line. When I matched Anne Bardon to the credits of *Heartline*, I called MGM back and got the name of her agent."

I leaned across the table and speared a piece of Walter's omelet with my fork. "Now listen," I said. "You're not listening. I called the agent and said I was in the casting department at Paramount and I wondered if Anne could be loaned out because maybe we had something for her. You like that, Walter?"

"I'm eating," Walter said.

"Sorry."

I had phoned him from the office and asked if he could meet me. He was working the four-till-midnight shift and acted like it was the biggest imposition to come down here ahead of time. But he had shown up, only five minutes late, wearing his usual white shirt with his T-shirt showing through, black pants, and brown leather jacket, the kind that bombardiers used in the war. I was wearing a navy Dior suit.

I picked up the first section of the *Daily Mirror*, which Walter had brought with him, and started reading the front page. The Republicans were still grumbling about Truman's $37 billion budget proposal, which they found perfidiously excessive.

"All right," Walter said. "Go on."

"The agent, one Darby Phillips, said Anne had not made a movie in over a year and he wasn't sure she was working anymore. How do you like that? He said her best role had been on a loan-out to RKO two years ago, a picture called *Remember the Moon* with Dorothy McGuire and Pat O'Brien. She played a nurse. He said he thought she was quite good, naturally, and did not understand why MGM wasn't taking advantage of her—quote—wealth of talent."

"Did you at least get a phone number, an address?" Walter pushed his plate away, with most of the food merely rearranged, and lit a cigarette.

I waited. "Sergeant Beame has my fingerprints on her lighter."

Walter said nothing.

"So do you think I should write the story this afternoon?"

Walter blinked. "What story?"

"Cute," I said. "I'll see you back at the office. Big-gossip item breaking. Judy Garland's dog broke its toe."

"Sit down and stop acting like a dope." Walter signaled for more coffee. "As I was saying, what story? You're going to write—what? That a girl was found dead at the beach. Five days ago? Girl's name was Anne Bardon, she made three movies. Years ago? Okay, so maybe if it's a slow news day, maybe they'll give you five graphs, jam it in between the ads for Dr. Scholl's arch binders and the Newman School of Real Estate, deep in section two."

I put down my coffee cup. I was angry. I didn't like being dismissed.

Walter called for the check.

"I want dessert," I said.

"The hell you do. You want sympathy."

"Walter . . ."

He pulled out his wallet. The check was for two dollars and forty cents. I slid a five onto the table. He was usually in debt.

Walter acted as if he didn't see the five. "You have to verify what this dame told you about Seeberg. You got to talk to a friend of her's. This is before you talk to Seeberg." He put his own five on top of the check.

"Listen, what if I make a deal with Beame? I tell him Anne's name. He promises me whatever he turns up."

Walter jammed his wallet back into his pants pocket. "You're really annoying me, kid."

"Why? Isn't that what you would do?"

"That's one of the things I would do, yes. But you ain't me. The police know me. This Beame, he'll haul you back in for questioning. Maybe put a tail on you. Maybe even slap an obstructing justice charge on you. You're looking for the easy way. You got an address?"

"I have a phone number."

Walter grinned. "Congratulations. You got a nickel? Go make a call, I'll wait."

"And who do you think is going to answer, Walter? Her ghost?"

"Ghost answers, then you got a story. Call."

I used the pay phone up front and came back to the table. "It's the number for the Maribou Arms on Franklin," I reported. "Rooming house sort of place. Woman at the desk said Anne Bardon used to live there but moved out at least a year ago. No forwarding anything."

"Good," said Walter, pushing back his chair.

"What's good?"

"After work, you stop by the Maribou Arms. Find out something from the desk lady. Anything. Then see if there's somebody around who remembers her. Coming?"

I was still angry.

"What about my fingerprints?" I demanded.

"Don't forget your five," Walter said.

The Maribou Arms was a two-story white stucco complex just west of La Brea on the south side of Franklin. I left Bret idling at the curb and walked up three steps to a stone path that led me to a wrought-iron archway. Through it lay a Spanish-tiled courtyard surrounded by a number of flat-roofed buildings. Dominating the center of the courtyard was a stagnant fountain out of which climbed a grotesque Venus. She could have used a bath.

It was dark. Gusts sent dead green leaves scuttling across the courtyard, producing thin, scratching noises that reminded me of mice. I shivered and moved on. A single light bulb in a glass ball was mounted above each apartment door, casting a sickly yellow glow. On the door to my right was the numeral 1 and a sign that said "Office." I adjusted my mink stole and knocked.

"Come in," came a responding voice.

I twisted the brass knob and pushed open the door. The room I entered appeared to be an apartment living room converted into a lobby-office. Everything was drab and worn: two stained green couches, a battered coffee table piled with wrinkled magazines, a print rug that was clinging to its last threads. To the left stood a counter. Behind it, on the wall, were two rows of mail slots, a collection of faded photographs of movie stars, and a calendar from the Acme Paint Co. On the counter stood a phone and a large brown Philco, out of which boomed the voice of H. V. Kaltenborn.

A fiftyish woman with chubby cheeks and a chiffon red rose pinned to her short gray hair sat behind the counter filing her nails. A heavy chest ballooned out of a flowered housedress. The flowers were roses.

She looked up with unwelcoming brown eyes.

"Hello," I said. "I'm Paris Chandler. I spoke to you, I believe, on the phone earlier. I was inquiring about Anne Bardon."

"Number seven, building on the left, second floor. Girl who took it after Anne moved out three days ago. Seven fifty a week." She reached into the folds of her housedress and slapped a key on the counter.

"No, I—"

"It's another five dollars a month you want me to take messages on this phone." She leaned over and tapped the phone on the counter. "No cooking in the room, no radio after ten, and no men, ever."

Her voice had a kind of husky whiskeyness to it; the kind that comes not from whiskey but from practice.

I walked over to the counter, removed my gloves and lay them down. "I'm looking for Anne, not a room. I'm sorry if I gave the wrong impression."

She raised a finger to her lips. ". . . Although Mr. Truman asserts his is a hard-boiled balanced budget, Republican leaders in Congress are demanding the budget request be pared by three to eight-and-a-half billion dollars," H. V. Kaltenborn said.

The woman reached up and turned the radio down. "If Truman thinks you balance a budget by spending more, he should take a look at my books," she said sourly. She brought her attention back to me. "You should take a look."

"At your books?"

"The room. We'll vacuum, clean it all up."

"Could you tell me how long Anne lived here?" It struck me then that the calendar on the wall was still turned to November. One of us was living in the wrong tense.

Her brown eyes narrowed. "What's it to you?"

I didn't know what kind of language this woman spoke. I tried the most universal one I knew. "She owes me money."

The woman snorted. "Everyone owes everyone money. Tell me something new."

"She was in a jam. It was a significant sum of money."

The woman gave me a different look: interested. "What kind of a jam?"

"It was a blackmail thing." I averted my eyes. "I'd rather not go into it."

"I knew it." The woman fingered the rose in her hair. "She was a nice girl but she lived such a strange life. I just knew it."

"Tell me about it."

"I mean every Monday, a man comes in, nicely dressed young man, and pays for Anne's room for the week. This goes on for eight months. Then one day he comes in and says Anne is moving out. And quicker than you can say Fibber McGee and Molly, she's gone."

"Do you remember this man's name?"

"Never told me. I guess when you're a movie star that's the way you live."

She stood up and shrugged into an old brown sweater that had been hanging on the back of her chair. She stopped halfway. "You a movie star, too? I was once in the movies myself."

"The man was a movie star?" I said.

"Oh, honey, I don't know what he was. No, I'm talking about Anne. She told me she was going to be famous. Sometimes one of those big black limousines would pick her up. Take her to some studio, I guess. But it seemed kind of funny, her riding around in limos and living here like this."

She surveyed the lobby with narrowed eyes and reconsidered her opinion of it. "I mean, I keep it clean and the guests are the right sort of people, don't get me wrong. You'd just think she'd have a place of her own."

"Especially with all of her callers," I put in.

"I don't know about that," the woman countered. "She'd get phone calls. From men. From Mikes and Peters and Roberts and the like. No last names. But only one man ever came to call for her that I ever saw. 'Cept for the man who paid her rent of course."

"The man who came to call for her—"

The door banged shut. I turned. A tall, thin man stood just inside the room, holding a leather leash that led to a wirehaired terrier. He wore a tweed jacket and had a long blue wool scarf thrown carelessly around his neck. "Did he come?" he said urgently.

"No, Mr. Wine. Not today."

"Perhaps while you were out, Mrs. Francis . . ."

His large dark eyes, set in a long, pale face, looked haunted.

"I haven't really been out, Mr. Wine. Maybe he'll come tomorrow."

The man raised his chin, did a rather theatrical about-face, and departed. Mrs. Francis stared at the door with sad eyes. She leaned across the counter conspiratorially. "He has a broken heart."

"Broken hearts mend."

"He's had it for three and a half years."

I didn't know what to do with that one. I said, "Uh, listen . . . is there anything about Anne you remember that would help me get in touch with her? A friend's name you recall. A number for an emergency?"

She acted as if she hadn't heard. Her eyes fixed to the radio. "At five to seven they give you the weather."

". . . Or someone living here who knew her."

She drifted back to the photographs taped to the wall.

"Myrna Loy," she breathed, gazing at one. "See what she wrote? 'To Rose with Love, Myrna.' She used to live here."

"Maybe there's another guest. A *recent* guest," I emphasized. "Someone who was friendly with Anne."

"Myrna was friendly with everyone."

The five-dollar bill from lunch was still in my suit pocket. I didn't know the going rates. I slid it across the counter. "Thank you, Mrs. Francis. I appreciate your time."

The woman half turned, spotted the five, then spun dreamily back to the pictures on the wall. Maybe the five wasn't enough. I'd have to check my Raymond Chandler.

She began mumbling something.

"Excuse me?"

"Number eight. That's where Myrna lived."

I stared at the back of her gray head for a moment, then I picked up my gloves and walked to the door.

"Just don't make any trouble," Mrs. Francis said.

Outside, the leaves were still scratching around the tiles; Venus looked lonely. I crossed the courtyard to the first building on the left. Five and six were on the first floor. I climbed a flight of metal stairs, walked past seven and stopped in front of number eight. I knocked. Through the door I could hear Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." I wondered if the occupant would be another Hollywood hopeful whose time had run out. Or, God forbid—Mr. Wine.

I knocked again. The music stopped.

"I'm coming!" A moment later the door was jerked open. A woman about my age was standing there holding together, with one hand, a thin white robe. The other hand held a cigarette. Her blond hair fell in tangled curls and contained enough bleach for a load of dirty laundry. Her brown eyes looked startled.

"Who are you?"

Behind her I could see a candle flickering in the darkness of the room. She had about her, or the room did, a heavy musky smell. I grinned. "A stranger. With bad timing. Maybe I'd better come back."

She peered over my shoulder. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. My name is Paris Chandler. I was hoping to talk to you about Anne Bardon."

Again the brown eyes showed surprise. "Anne?"

"Look, I can come back."

"No, wait. Let me turn on a light. He . . . my friend left already. Actually, I thought that was him forgetting something."

She partially closed the door while, I assumed, she hurriedly straightened up. Eventually a light came on and she returned, robe belted, to usher me inside.

The big rectangular room contained an unmade Murphy bed upon which a white coverlet had been tossed, a small couch in a horrid gold and yellow pattern, a coffee table with a bowl of daisies, a white wicker rocking chair with pretty yellow-and-white-striped pillows, a standing lamp, and a small wooden table. On one wall hung a recruitment poster from the war, and beside it, a framed photograph of what appeared to be, at this distance, women in uniform. Aside from the bed, the room was obsessively neat.

The girl collapsed on the Murphy bed and offered me the rocking chair, noting, "It's the only furniture that's mine. Now what's this about Anne?"

She was almost pretty. But a pink scar across her right cheek and the pitted skin of teenage acne had robbed her of her looks. "First of all," I said, "I take it your name is not Myrna Loy."

"Oh, God." She burst out laughing. "That woman is a fruitcake. Do you know she told me this was a lucky room, and I was lucky to get it? I told her I was taking classes and she assumed I meant acting and I let her keep assuming. Actually, I'm taking a secretarial course. My name is Betty Fox."

"Thank you for inviting me in, Betty. I take it you knew Anne."

She hesitated. "Knew?"

"I mean . . . knew her when she rented a room here. Mrs. Francis indicated you did."

"Uh-huh." Her fingers began carelessly playing with a thin gold chain that she wore around her neck. But her eyes were measuring me.

I wasn't very practiced at this game, or at least I wasn't comfortable with it. To lie meant work. I sighed inwardly and began embroidering a new one. I said:

"We worked on a couple of pictures together a while back. And we became friendly. I really liked her. But my career was going nowhere. So about eight months ago I went to work for a talent agency. I think I've found something Anne might be good in but I don't know how to find her." I opened my purse. "May I smoke?"

Betty Fox nodded, stood up and brought me a plastic ashtray. I suddenly felt self-conscious. I could tell by the way she was looking at me, she was sizing me up, thinking, Well, doesn't she do swell for herself, wearing those fancy clothes. It appeared I was going to have to schedule major surgery on my closet.

"Did you know Anne socially?" Betty inquired as she sat back down on the bed.

"Just a couple of evenings out." I rolled my eyes. "Mainly we palled around together on the set."

"Mm." She lit a cigarette. "I don't know what to tell you. I haven't talked to Anne in a while myself."

"Isn't that odd? Even MGM doesn't seem to have much information, although she's under contract there."

Betty Fox said nothing. Either she knew things she didn't want to talk about or she was by nature discreet. I hated women who were discreet.

I said, "Did you ever meet Jack? I wonder if she's still going with him."

Betty raised an eyebrow. "Jack? I don't remember a Jack." She smiled. "Of course there were so many. I used to say, 'Be a sport, Anne. Lend me one.'"

"Me, too." I giggled. "I bet this place swarmed with her suitors."

"Not really. We can't have men in our rooms, house rules. Or so they say. But sometimes I would get her phone calls. I don't know why she didn't put in her own phone. So I would take messages and slip them under her door."

"That's funny," I said. "Because when I knew her I'm sure it was Jack Seeberg she was seeing. You don't remember? He was the director on the pictures we did."

Betty fingered the scar on her cheek. "Look, I only moved in here last October. I mean, the October before. Anne moved out in March, I think, so we weren't friends that long. She gave me her new address when she left and promised to call. But she never did. The truth is, I saw her only once after that. Last summer, I think. I bumped into her coming out of Michael's salon on Canon. We gabbed a minute and she said she'd call. But . . ."

"Do you still have her address?"

Betty stood up. "I was looking for it recently. I wanted to send her a Christmas card. I couldn't find it."

I didn't know if she was telling the truth. But my time was clearly up. I angled out of the rocking chair and walked over to the photo on the wall. There were six women in the shot, but they were at a distance and I couldn't tell if one of them was Betty.

"WACS," she said. "Friends of mine."

I turned. "You were in the Army?"

"The Red Cross. That's why I still haven't finished school."

Her tone did not invite additional conversation. I snapped my handbag closed. "Perhaps you know of someone else I might try."

Betty had the door open. "Anne wasn't one for girlfriends. And as for men . . ."

"Yes?"

"She never kept them for long."

10

It was the usual Hollywood premiere with klieg lights flashing and camera bulbs exploding and a mob of screaming fans roped off to the left. I stepped out of the Bentley and into a crush of people milling outside The Egyptian.

The event was the opening of *Sinbad the Sailor* with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Maureen O'Hara, Walter Slezak, and Anthony Quinn, which had totally slipped my mind until Bret, upon my return to the car, wordlessly headed for Hollywood instead of home. I was not in the mood for this. I was irritable, having left Betty Fox empty-handed. I was tired. And I was hungry.

As I edged closer to the entrance, progress became nearly impossible. I was trying to maneuver my ticket out of my purse, and not get knocked over, when a voice hissed beside me, "Keep your hands off me, you lecherous old fool. Or I'll . . ."

I turned my head. The words had been spoken by a beautifully dressed woman who had just wormed in front of me and who was now clawing at a man's arm that encircled her waist. I was struck by the look of utter annoyance on her face and then I was struck by the face. It was Maureen O'Hara glowering at Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. They inched forward. I surged.

"Don't make a scene, darling. It's boring," Fairbanks murmured.

"I'll make a scene worthy of an Oscar if you so much as touch me again," Miss O'Hara snipped.

I bit my lip. And kept pace behind them. When they reached the red velvet rope, they both, in unison, broke out photogravure smiles for the flashing bulbs, then Fairbanks, daring the gods, grabbed her elbow and ushered the petulant actress inside.

Yum, yum, yum, I thought. I found a phone in the lobby and called the Item in to the city desk, giving instructions to pass it along to Etta Rice when she phoned in. Etta was undoubtedly inside somewhere, but my chances of finding her were slim.

Two hours later, after the house lights came up, I followed the crowd into the lobby, where buffet tables had been set up. I was worming my way into the roast-beef line when Nick appeared at my elbow.

"So you are here. I thought you might be here. Although I didn't tell anyone that."

He was wearing a navy blazer, white shirt, tie, and beige slacks, very Hollywood. He also had a vivid imprint of red lips on his left cheek. I reached up and rubbed it off.

He seemed not to notice. His eyes were too busy flitting about, searching no doubt for an Item, or a beautiful woman, most likely not in that order.

"Don't move," he said suddenly.

"Why?"

"A cop named Beame showed up at the office around seven o'clock looking for you."

"At the office? It's your day off."

"I had left my ticket for tonight. I did want to come tonight." He glanced over my shoulder. "And now he's here looking for you. I didn't tell him you'd be here, I said I didn't know."

"He's probably not here then." My attention wandered.

"I saw him only a few minutes ago. I think if you don't want to see him, we can slip out the side door. . . ."

Even in a crowd like this one, he stood out. He was coming through the door into the lobby, pausing there, looking around. Then smiling, stopping now to chat with a silver-haired man and a chubby woman. Bending down, kissing the woman's cheek.

Jack Seeberg.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'll be right back."

I crept along, trying to see who Seeberg was with. Not his wife, this woman was shorter, slender. I jostled my way toward them, finally elbowing in directly behind him, turning sideways, getting the profile of the girl.

"It wasn't like this before the war," the silver-haired man observed. "I mean, have you noticed the *Examiner* runs a scorecard each day? How many robberies, muggings, murders . . ."

She was beautiful. Wavy, dark hair, a cupid's red mouth, her dark purple suit, tucked at the waist, to show off quite a little body.

"That's because the old man's wife got her purse stolen," said Seeberg. "Hearst's wife . . . what's her name?" He snapped his fingers but the name didn't come.

"Everyone *I* know is getting a gun," said the brunette languidly. "Maybe I should get one, huh, Jack?" She wrapped her fingers around his elbow and gazed up at him, unsmiling.

"My son has a gun," supplied the older man. "Brought it home from the war. I told him I didn't like it. But . . . who knows?"

"It's bad enough with Bugsy Siegel running all over the place," said his wife grimly. "It's like an advertisement. Come to L.A. and shoot the town up."

"One of my wife's friends is taking target practice," Seeberg said suddenly. "She wants to start a gun club for the girls."

"What?" said the woman.

"Where *is* Helen?" said the man.

"Home," remarked Seeberg blandly. "She despises industry business."

Uh-huh, I thought. Sure.

"Actually . . ." said Seeberg.

"A gun club?" said the woman. "How do you mean a . . . gun club?"

"Why, that's it," said Seeberg excitedly. "An entire town of women arming themselves, you see? To protect the men. The men are at work, the women learn to shoot and set up patrols. We could call it—"

"Are you joking?" the woman said harshly.

"He's talking about a movie," sighed the brunette. "Aren't you, Jack?"

At which point, a hand clutched my elbow. It was Nick's. I raised a finger to my lips. He nodded, his eyes flicking over at Seeberg. Then he tightened his grip and gave me a yank.

"Stop it," I said.

"Beame's coming."

"I am not an escaped convict."

Nick kept right on plowing through people, tugging me, until we reached the side door. He pushed it open and we stepped out into an alley. The door slammed shut.

"What do you think you're doing?" I was hot.

"He was coming. If you want to go back in, we'll go back in. But it just kind of caught my fancy. Rescuing you."

"What you rescued me from was the most bizarre movie plot I've ever heard." I adjusted my fur. "And—the first real food I would have had all day."

"What's that cop want?" Nick looked at me skeptically. "You haven't made off with Etta's secret files, have you?"

"I think I'm going to faint."

"I'll buy you a sandwich . . . have you?"

"Where's your car?"

"What about Martin? You hate my car."

"It's not Martin, it's *Bret*. He can find his way home. What about Etta?"

"I'll call in from the restaurant if you remind me. I like your perfume."

"Yes, it makes men want to rescue me."

Nick made a face and began pulling me toward the street.

"Keep your hands off me, you lecherous old fool."

"*What?*" said Nick.

I began to giggle.

* * *

For some reason we did not go to a restaurant but ended up at my house. Mrs. Keyes had gone to bed. While Nick was phoning the paper, I rummaged through the refrigerator and found a half of meat loaf wrapped in wax paper. I made two sandwiches and took out the tin of potato chips from the cabinet.

"Some milk?" I said as Nick hung up.

"Coke. If you have it."

I opened a bottle for him and poured a glass of milk for myself. We sat at the kitchen table eating. After a while it struck me that something was slightly off. Then I realized what. For all of the time Nick and I had spent together, it was always at the office, out in the evening on the job, or riding in a car. Sitting in the kitchen, late at night, the house a little too quiet, seemed somehow uncomfortably intimate. I caught his eye. He glanced away.

"So what's this with the police?" he said after a moment.

"Do you mind some music? I think I'll turn the radio on." I got up and walked over to the counter, twisted the dial to KMPC. Tommy Dorsey. When I turned around Nick was watching me. I smiled. "Actually, it was rather sweet. The way you rescued me."

"Someone has to."

"Would you like another sandwich?"

"Sit down and eat yours."

I returned to the table.

"Does it have something to do with work? With that Seeberg girl?"

I bit into the meat loaf, chewed. Swallowed. Drank some milk. "I really like your friend Tee."

"Yes, she's something, isn't she."

"Are you sure you don't want another sandwich?"

"No."

"No, you don't, or no, you're not sure?"

"No, I don't."

"Frankly," I said, "she doesn't seem like your type. I believe I detected a mind."

Nick loosened his tie. "Is that Dorsey? Let's go to Ciro's one night. Anyway, you're not that different, you know."

"Really."

"Except that Tee's more honest. She's tough and smart and is her own woman. Every single minute. You're tough and smart, too. Only you hide it. Those eyes, they don't miss anything."

"Is that so. When did you become such an expert on me?"

"Besides," said Nick, "Tee and I are only business friends."

"Did I ask?"

"She's doing something for me."

"Oh, you mean one of those little odd jobs that you don't want to do for yourself? I see."

Nick's Coke bottle hit the table a little too hard. "What's the matter with you, Paris? You're crabby."

"Sorry. Maybe I'm just tired."

Which is when Judy Garland's "I Wish I Were in Love Again" came on and Nick stood up. "Let's dance. This is the perfect song for you."

I hesitated. Nick came around the table. He took my hand and led me into the center of the kitchen. Then he put his arm around my waist and began leading me in a slow fox trot. Whatever after-shave he had splashed on smelled wonderful. I leaned a bit closer.

"I've been wanting to ask you something," he said softly.

"Mm."

"Why don't you ever talk about your husband? You've never talked about him, not once. It's not normal."

I stopped moving. I stood very still. There was a look about Nick I had not seen before; a sort of irritation, as if I had owed him something for a very long time and now I was supposed to pay up.

"I don't think it's any of your business."

"Oh yes it is. I care about you, if you haven't noticed. How am I supposed to feel close to you if you won't talk about—"

"Why are you beating up on me? You've been beating up on me all night."

Nick pulled me toward him again, murmuring, "It's okay. Relax. One more dance, you'll sleep better. You're all wound up."

He began humming. I put my head on his shoulder. He tightened his arms around me. I closed my eyes. I knew what was coming next. He was going to kiss me and I wasn't going to stop him . . . the song ended; not tonight. We stood there, looking into each other's eyes.

His eyes flickered. "What the . . . ?"

He pushed me away just as there came a loud banging at the kitchen door. I spun around to see a face pressed against the glass. "Christ," said Nick, pulling open the door. "What are *you* doing here?"

Sgt. Billy Beame stepped into the kitchen, smiling. "Back doors seem to be in fashion tonight. Evening Mr. Goodwin. Miss Chandler."

It was eleven-thirty. He was in another zoot-suit ensemble. I said, "Don't you ever sleep? Take a night off? Go bowling? I resent you bursting into my house like this." I walked over to the table and sat down.

"It won't take long, Miss Chandler. Sorry to interrupt. It's just that I have some news and I thought you'd be interested." His teeth flashed. "Especially since you're in the news business."

"Nick," I said. "It's late. Perhaps you'd like to run along."

"Perhaps I'll stay."

I stood up. "Excuse me, Sergeant, I'll be right back. Nick?"

I led him down the long hall to the front door. "Please. It's personal. I'll be all right."

"I'm not leaving you with that goon."

"You can't pry into my business."

"I wouldn't think of prying into your business. I'll wait in the study."

I sighed as he walked into the study and slammed the door.

I went back to the kitchen. Sergeant Beame was standing at the table. I sat down and continued eating my sandwich.

"Her name was Anne Bardon. Ring a bell?"

I put down the sandwich.

"She was an actress, did you know that?"

"Not particularly. But congratulations. How did you find out?"

"Anonymous tipster. Say, do you mind if I have a Coke?"

"Of course not. In the fridge. Help yourself. But I can't recommend the meat loaf. Mrs. Keyes thinks pepper is all the rage."

Beame brought a Coke back to the table and sat in Nick's chair. I said, "So you got a phone call from a tipster?"

"Yeah. Saying a friend seemed to be missing. An Anne Bardon by name."

"Frankly I would have thought you might have run her picture in the papers ages ago. Does anybody recognize this woman? But then, I know nothing of the police." I wanted a cigarette. I got up and walked over to the counter where I'd left my purse. Dick Haymes was singing "Kiss Me Once, Kiss Me Twice." Angrily I shut the radio off.

"Sometimes that kind of thing backfires," Beame said. "It scares the killer into hiding. You don't make a fuss, he gets cocky."

I lit a cigarette. "Well thanks for bringing me the news. Don't worry about the Coke. You can take it with you."

Beame crossed his legs. "I'm not ready to leave." He grinned unpleasantly. "You don't seem very curious for a news hen."

I sat down and leaned back in the chair. "All right, Sergeant. Regale me. I'm all ears."

"She lived in a small house in West Hollywood. Orlando Street address. Not much furniture but nice. All of her things had been packed. Suitcases all over the place. We went through the suitcases . . ."

"Naturally." I exhaled.

"Interesting," he said.

"Tell me," I said.

Beame gave me the once-over. "She had the kind of clothes you could understand."

"I see."

"Yeah. Real expensive stuff. Fancy labels, I'm told. Perfume, jewelry, a couple of furs. Underwear made of that shiny stuff."

"Silk," I volunteered.

"Yeah. Now don't you think that's odd?"

"Depends upon your taste, I suppose. Personally I like itchy wool underwear."

I got one of those looks that told me to cut it out. I moved my mouth into a smile. "What else did you find?"

"Nothing. Now here's the thing. Anne Bardon was a twenty-six-year-old actress who . . ."

"Twenty-six?"

". . . had not worked in over a year. When she did work, she had bit parts. And here she is with all this expensive stuff, living in a house that rents for sixty bucks a month. Nash Rambler in the driveway."

"I see."

"But that's not the odd thing. The odd thing is we go through all her stuff, go through the desk, the drawers in the kitchen, and guess what?"

"What?" I supplied.

He picked up the bottle and took a long slow drink, building the suspense, I suppose. Then looking at me with bright, shiny eyes, he declared, "No friends."

"Ah." I took a final drag on my cigarette and stubbed it out. "Maybe you looked in the wrong place. Did you try the closets?"

Beame reddened. "Look Chandler, it's late. You want to finish here or you want to go down to the station? Me, I'd rather finish here."

"Okay. So she had no friends. Now what?" Beame said nothing. He was still nursing his anger. "Well don't look at me," I went on. "I wasn't a friend."

"Uh-huh. And what exactly were you?"

I sighed. We were off and running again. "She called the paper one day. Actually, she came in. Came in one morning and said she had a story."

Beame raised an eyebrow. "She had a story for you?"

"Not exactly. She wanted to see Etta Rice, but Etta, of course, wasn't in. Etta never is."

"And what was this story that I assume she told you?"

"She said we ought to do an article about the lives of struggling young actresses. She said she had a lot to tell."

"She said that to you in your office?"

"Yes. Sitting at my desk."

"Go on."

"She seemed nervous. Then she decided she should think it over. You know, before telling me whatever it was she wanted to tell me. And then she left."

"But she was there long enough for you to smoke and use her lighter."

"I don't remember exactly. I use so many lighters."

"Or maybe you saw her again and used her lighter?"

"I did speak to her again. She called once or twice. She told me she was still thinking."

"And based on this—I mean I assume people are always dropping into your office with things to put in the paper—based on these few minutes, you raced over to the police station to see if she was the Jane Doe?"

"Sure. Why not? The description fit her."

"Uh-huh. And then you lied at the mortuary."

"I did," I conceded. "Sorry."

"Just like you're lying now."

"Why would I be lying now? I just thought maybe I had a story. Girl comes to Hollywood to make good. Ends up badly dead."

"Right," said Beame. "A gossip columnist's legman decides to do some investigative reporting. I'm terribly impressed."

"Well I know it sounds . . . Look, Sergeant. I need a story like that. To prove myself at the paper. I'm kind of suspect at the moment. Besides, afternoon teas and evening premieres get kind of old, if you know what I mean."

"Keep going," said Beame. "You might hit on something I'll buy."

I put an indignant look on my face. "That is the truth. You can't imagine what it's like at the paper for me." I paused and fumbled for a new cigarette. I let my hands shake to impress upon him how upset I was. After a while I said, "All right. There is one other thing. Which you probably wouldn't understand anyway."

"Try me, Miss Chandler. I'm an understanding guy."

I tried him because I needed a confirmation.

"When she came to the office she had a change of heart, like I told you," I said. "I thought it was because she was afraid that if she revealed too much she might not work in Hollywood again. But she said no, that wasn't it. She said she was pregnant and she was afraid that somehow what she said might cause repercussions and they might come back to hurt her child."

Beame looked suddenly alert. "When was that? Exactly."

"Let me see." I thought back. "It was a Friday. The day she came to the office."

"Uh-huh. And when was the last time you talked to her? You said you spoke to her again."

"Um. It was either Monday or Tuesday."

Beame stood up.

"Are you leaving?"

"Unless you invite me to spend the night." He leered.

I leered back. "Considering that so much of it is already gone, it would seem like a wasted opportunity."

"You're very funny, Chandler. Just don't take this little joke any further. Your story is dead. Keep your nose out of it."

He turned his back and walked across the kitchen. He opened the door next to the pantry and went out into the night.

I stood there for a moment gathering my thoughts, wondering what I had given up by telling him that Anne Bardon was pregnant. And not getting the confirmation I sought. Enough of it. I went down the hall to find Nick, hoping we could resume our places before the music stopped.

The door to the study was wide open. The lights were on. But there was no Nick. I called his name several times. He didn't answer. He hadn't even left me a note.

I turned off the lights and dragged upstairs to bed.

Remembering the scent of his cologne.

". . . Lunar position highlights sex appeal. Some will comment, 'Your eyes devaste me!'"

11

"I saw your mother last week. She's a spectacular woman," Horst said.

"How come my hair looks so blah?"

"She colors her hair of course."

"She's gray." I stared at myself in the mirror. "What do you think of red hair for me? Long red hair. Wavy."

Horst ran his fingers through my hair. "You're in a terrible mood, my dear. Let's shampoo."

It was Tuesday morning, eleven o'clock. Etta had phoned me at home just as I was leaving for the office. The Fairbanks-

O'Hara Item had been positively "delicious," she cooed, which is why she had used it to lead off her column. More to the point: She wondered if I could attend a party this evening—she had another more pressing commitment—and if so, I could take the rest of the day off.

Which brought me into Gabriela's Salon; more specifically, into the hands of Horst; yes, *the* Horst, "Hairdresser to the Stars," as he was commonly referred to in the gossip columns.

"Now, love, what *shall* we do?" he sighed, after I had been laboriously shampooed and ceremoniously returned to his turquoise imitation-leather chair.

"Let's just cut it," I said, giving up the notion of long red curls.

"No, no, no!"

"Oh?"

"Look at *this.*" With practiced hands, Horst scooped up my damp hair and piled it on top of my head. "See? Veddy, veddy glamorous. And with dangling earrings? Perfect for the evenings, love. If we cut, it simply won't go up."

"I see."

"So. We'll squeeze a little lemon juice to brighten the blond. Then I'll set it. I can put it up for you . . . are you going dancing tonight? Or we can just do a turned-under thing."

Horst was a tall, bony man who always worked in a black turtleneck sweater, no matter the weather, and black pants. He may have been an "artiste," but by far his best selling point was that he trafficked in the juiciest gossip in Beverly Hills. *Everyone* came to Gabriela's Salon, and once tucked into one of her pink possibly leather chairs—only Horst rated turquoise—everyone spilled her guts. Horst, to his credit, held nothing back, dishing the dirt in properly hushed tones, liberally sprinkled with exclamation points. It took a while to get the hang of exclamatory oration, but once you did, nothing in Beverly Hills was safe anymore.

Which was the reason, of course, I had ventured in.

As he bent over me and began snipping the ends, I commented on how busy the salon seemed for a Tuesday morning.

"But my dear, it's *always* like this. You're just never here so early in the week. I mean Tuesday mornings are when, well . . ." his voice dropped, "the back-door girls come in."

"You mean . . ." I said.

"Of course!" he said.

I lowered my voice. "Ah, but Horst, exactly which back doors are we talking about?"

"We are *talking* about power, love. Because as you know, true power in this town is not measured in screen credits or salaries."

"Oh?"

"No. It's measured in girls kept!"

"How delicious!"

"Yes! Which is why they all come in on Tuesdays, you see. Because on Thursdays and Fridays and Saturdays . . ."

I giggled. "The wives come in!"

Horst grinned wickedly. "Now bend your head forward and hold still."

"And," I said, bending my head so that the words rolled off my chin, "how does Jack Seeberg rank in your power system?"

"Are you serious?" Horst was incredulous. "Why, love, he is right up there, don't you know? He's got girls stashed in apartments all over town."

"What do you mean stashed—how many?"

"I mean, well, I've heard, as many as five or six. He pays their rents, buys them things." He bent lower and whispered, "I've heard he has them do the most *amazing* things. My dear, I couldn't even begin to describe them."

Through my hair I glanced at the mirror. Horst's face was flushed. I said, "But how do you know this? Do they come in and just tell you?"

"Not *me*. But two of them have told Sarah."

Sarah was one of the manicurists. I said, "Do you know their names, Horst? Was one an Anne Bardon?"

"Hold these clips for me, please. No, I don't know that name. But one is Lauralee Hart. She comes in at one o'clock. There's another called Yvette something. But I haven't seen her lately."

Lauralee Hart turned out to be the girl in the purple suit whom I'd seen with Jack Seeberg the night before.

And at one o'clock, this Lauralee Hart encountered a friendly, talkative woman in the nail salon, where she, and the stranger also, just happened to be having side-by-side pedicures. Lauralee was one of those Veronica Lake lookalikes who spent half the day sweeping hair out of her eyes and the other half giving all of her hair a good overall toss. I silently pledged to practice this routine in front of my mirror that night. In the meantime I tried to pick up a pattern. Toss, toss, sweep? Or sweep, toss, sweep? After an hour and a half I couldn't find a meaningful sequence. Apparently it was one of those skills packaged in your genes.

I did find a meaningful pattern, however, to the life of Lauralee Hart.

After chatting inanely for fifteen minutes, during which time she let it drop that she was under contract to MGM, I admired a thin, gold ankle bracelet she had removed and was presently rubbing with a piece of Kleenex.

"It's lovely," I told her. "Was it a gift?"

Lauralee tossed her head and parted her red cupid lips to reveal a beautiful porcelain smile. "Why, yes," she breathed. "For Christmas. I just love it, don't you?"

She took it out of the Kleenex and handed it to me. A tiny gold oval in the middle of the chain was inscribed L.H. "Gee, he must be somebody special," I sighed.

She giggled. "Oh, definitely. And what about you? Do you have a fella?"

"Uh-huh."

Then we both giggled. "How long have you been with your man?" Lauralee asked.

"Oh, awhile," I said. "Two years."

"Me, too. Well, two and a half. It's a nice arrangement. But like when my mother comes to visit . . ." She rolled her eyes.

"Where do you live?" I inquired. "Maybe we could have lunch sometime."

"Great," said Lauralee. "I live on Poinsetta in Hollywood. On days when I don't have to be on the lot, I'm allowed to go out between 11:45 and two-thirty. There are some nice luncheonettes around there. Or sometimes, I'll go to a movie."

"Swell," I said. "When are you free?"

"Well what happens is, I can go out at nine-thirty. I take voice from ten to eleven. Then I have to check my answering service, and if there's no message, I can stay out until two-thirty. Jack knows I have an acting class on the lot from three to five. So as long as I'm back by five-thirty, it's okay. But weekends I'm on call the whole time." She wrinkled her nose. "God, how I hate weekends, don't you? I could just *die* of boredom."

I was so stunned, it took me a moment to respond. I had lived in the world of Hollywood my whole life and thought I had a fair grasp of how that world operated, casting couch included. It was such a common practice that I was frankly amazed some clever guy hadn't by now become a tycoon marketing a piece of furniture called the "Casting Couch." But what Lauralee Hart was telling me went far beyond the mindless or even cruel dalliance of an ego-libidinous mogul. This bordered on some kind of consentual slavery; I wasn't sure what kind.

I mumbled something about, yes, weekends being rather tiresome, then, "Let me ask you something, Lauralee. Do you ever get, uh, jealous? You know, of the other girls?"

Lauralee swept the hair out of her eye. "No, why should I? Unless one of them gets a part in a movie that I want. Then I get really mad. I'm like a caged animal and my guy does not want to be around me. But otherwise . . . I mean, he's not someone I *love*. God, you can't fall in love with them." She gave me a quick, inquiring look. "Honey, take it from me. Don't fall in love with them. You do that, you're dead."

My manicurist began fanning my feet with a piece of cardboard. I stared at my bright red toenails and began to feel my stomach churn. I could see that toenail, bright red, the big one, sticking out from under the sheet at the mortuary.

Lauralee nudged me. "Don't look so glum, honey. Love is for losers, anyway." The curvy cupid mouth smiled. "It's what they get as a consolation prize."

After I left Gabriela's, I turned up Beverly Drive and into Mel's Coffee Shop, which, at 2:45, was almost deserted. I ordered a chicken salad sandwich and a cup of coffee and then I turned my thoughts back to the dead actress.

That morning the *Examiner* had run a story identifying the girl found on the beach six days ago as Anne Bardon, 967 Orlando Avenue, a contract actress at MGM. George Healy, a young reporter covering crime, had done a nice job with the story, but had uncovered nothing new. But then to Healy, only Capone counted. Routinely, he had quoted several people at MGM offering syrupy words about Anne and had reached her father, who refused to say anything at all. The Babiches were on their way from Ames, Iowa, for the funeral, which was to take place on Friday. The story contained no reference to Jack Seeberg. The police had no leads.

The sandwich still had not come. I went to the pay phone and rang Mrs. Keyes. Walter, she told me, had phoned twice.

"You should have given him the number at Gabriela's," I chided.

"Oh I told him. But he said he didn't do the beauty-shop beat, and he hung up. He's rude."

I told her I'd be home by three-thirty and to please not answer the phone with "Chandler residence," but just a hello. I dropped another nickel in the box and tried Walter at home. No answer. I sat down and ate half the sandwich. I wrapped the other half in a paper napkin and slipped it into my purse. Then I took off on foot for home.

A battered green Packard was cooling its wheels in my driveway when I turned in twenty minutes later.

I opened the passenger door. "My. This must be important," I said.

"Yeah, but not as important as your hair. Get in."

Walter's hat was pulled low over his eyes. He was wearing basically the same color scheme as usual, only today he had added a tie. Maybe he felt he needed one to get into Beverly Hills. Walter hated Beverly Hills.

I climbed in and slammed the door. You had to slam the door. "Do you like it at least?" I asked.

"Like what?" Walter was backing out of the drive.

"My hair." I patted it. Walter glanced at me but said nothing. "I guess it looks pretty much the same, huh?"

"You want a compliment, ask your boyfriend. What's that smell?"

"Chicken salad sandwich. Do you mind if I finish it?"

"First thing you learn in this business, don't get sandwiches that smell. You never have time to finish 'em. Sliced chicken or turkey, no mayo, they can sit around for a long time, no smell." He grunted. "Go ahead, eat."

"Thanks. We're going somewhere?"

"Yep. To 967 Orlando. Home of the dearly departed Anne Bardon."

I stopped chewing.

"It was in the papers, which you probably didn't see because you were busy getting—"

"I was busy getting some rather interesting sidelights on the life of Jack Seeberg," I said testily. "But that can wait. Beame came to see me again last night."

As Walter honked through the traffic on Santa Monica, I filled him in. "The two tricky parts are these," I finished. "One. Beame said he couldn't find anything in her luggage or her house to connect her with friends. But the day she came to the office, she had a small red-leather address book. She took it out of her purse when she was looking for her lighter. She didn't open it, so maybe it had nothing written in it. Though why anyone would carry a blank address book around, I frankly wouldn't know."

Walter tossed his cigarette out the window.

"Also," I said. "When Beame came over to my house the first time, he told me he had found her purse on the beach. He told me what was in it. He did not mention an address book."

"Uh-huh."

"Secondly, Beame seemed very interested when I told him that she was pregnant, or had said she was. Wouldn't they have already known that?"

Walter turned right at Orlando. He drove around the block once, scouting for police, before pulling up to the curb several doors down from 967. It was not an impressive house from the outside, a small concrete box like most on the street, set back on a patch of lawn; no trees. The winter sun was slanting low over the flat rooftops. I slipped on my sunglasses as I followed Walter up the sidewalk.

A yellow Nash Rambler was parked in the drive. The street had an abandoned feel to it; nobody out, no sounds coming from any of the square, colorless houses. It could have been a ghost colony. I kept following Walter. When we got to the front door, it suddenly occurred to me that he intended to break in.

The door was locked. "She must have a key hidden somewhere," he grumbled, moving around. "They always hide a key."

"I am not going in," I said determinedly. "What if the police come?"

Walter found a key. In the first geranium pot next to the front stoop. He opened the door and walked in.

I stayed put on the stoop. "I mean it, Walter. What if Sergeant Beame shows up?"

"They have visiting hours, kid. You can arrange it so that's when your hairdresser comes."

I stared at the back of his brown leather jacket. Then I stepped inside. And kicked him. A hard, pointy-toed blow to the right ankle bone.

"Jesus," yelped Walter, hopping up and down.

I stood there frozen. "Are you okay?"

Walter was bent over, rubbing his ankle.

"You make me so mad, Walter. I mean you're just so . . ."

"So *what*?" he growled, glaring up at me.

"So . . . down and out. That's your favorite thing, I think. Being down and out."

Walter was still rubbing his ankle, the big baby.

I said, "You love throwing everything I am back in my face. I'm sick of it. I really am, Walter."

I turned my back on him and looked for the first time at the foyer we were standing in. It contained a blond wooden console with a mirror over it and the kind of green-flowered wallpaper Anne Bardon would never have chosen.

A hand fluttered tentatively onto my shoulder. "All right, I'm sorry. If I get outta line, say so. Just don't kick me, for Christ's sake."

I turned to him and sighed. "I'm sorry, too, Walter. Believe me, I don't normally go around kicking people—I scratch." I held up my hands and studied my fingernails. "But I just had them done."

Beame was not exaggerating about the suitcases. I counted six large ones, a makeup case, and one full-blown steamer trunk. All but three cases lay open on the living room floor. They were not made of good-quality leather but of cardboard, covered with cheap brown material. The trunk was metal.

Walter was kneeling on the beige carpet, not touching anything, just looking. "I'd bet a sawbuck it was the coppers who opened the suitcases." He stood up. "So let's not waste time. Anything interesting, they probably found it. You take the bedroom, I'll start with this desk."

"What am I looking for?" I asked dubiously.

"Also check the bathroom. Look in the medicine cabinet, all the drawers. Feel for things taped under the drawers. Look under the mattress. Thumb through the pages of books, if there are any. The police have probably done this, but we're cleverer." He grinned.

"I still don't know what I'm looking for."

"You will when you see it. You got gloves? Wear 'em."

A doorway at the back of the living room led to a hall that ran parallel to it. I followed the hall to the right. Soon I came to a bathroom on the left. A few feet more . . . her bedroom. It was not a large room but it contained all of the usual props. A four-poster bed with a flowered pink chintz canopy and matching bedspread dominated the room. It faced a mirrored wall. By the windows, draped in the same flowered chintz, reposed a pale green winged chair and ottoman. On the wall opposite stood a makeup table, with all of its drawers pulled open, and a mirror. Several feet beyond it, a door led into the bathroom I had passed down the hall.

I walked around the bed and studied the mirrored wall while I slipped on the short black leather gloves I had tucked into my purse. Barely visible was the outline of a door. I pushed it open and looked into a square closet that contained two wooden chests of drawers. Half a dozen blouses and a skirt still hung on the rod. All the drawers in the chests were open.

The drawers were empty. Not even the usual scraps of paper and crumbs that somehow inevitably collect in them. I pulled each drawer out of its slot and felt underneath. Nothing. I turned to the bed. Carefully I pulled off the bedspread. Then the blanket. Finally the sheets. I shook the pillows out of their cases. I got down on my hands and knees and checked under the bed. I pulled off the mattress. I looked behind the bedside tables. If the room held a secret, it wasn't giving it up.

I walked back down the hall and into a second bedroom, which contained twin beds, a table between them, and one dresser. I searched the bathroom and the linen closet. Then I wandered into the living room. Walter was not there.

I found him in the kitchen, standing on a chair, running his hands along the top of the metal cabinets.

"There's something awfully wrong," I said.

"Like what?" Walter got down off the chair and rubbed his hands together to shake off the dust. Then he moved the chair a few feet along and climbed back up.

"Nobody—not even Mrs. Truman, I bet—has drawers with no gunk in them. I mean when you're moving out of a place, you don't clean it that good. There are linens in the linen closet and a few things in the medicine cabinet. But I can't imagine she was coming back. Nobody takes all of their clothes with them to go somewhere temporarily, even someone like her."

I paused. "It's almost as if she were moving in, not moving out."

"She was moving out," said Walter, still running his hands along the cabinet tops. He stopped, plucking off a crumpled-up piece of paper. He stepped down off the chair. "Or maybe she was just parking her stuff. But somebody definitely lived here. Open boxes of cereal in the cabinet, milk bottles in the refrigerator, stuff like that. Fresh food."

He uncrumpled the paper, flattened it out. "Hmmph," he said, and crumpled it up again. "A recipe."

"Is there any garbage?"

"Not in the house." And if it was put out back, it would have been picked up by now. Though we'll check."

"So what do you think?" I was anxious to leave.

"I *think* someone came through this house like a human vacuum cleaner. Not the police, they leave gunk. As you put it. But someone who knew she was dead and wanted to remove all of her personal things."

"But where was she going? She didn't say she was going anywhere. And I'll tell you what else is funny, Walter. Sergeant Beame told me she had two dollars in her purse. Now where was her money? She must have had a checkbook or a savings-account book, some cash, something, don't you think?"

"Police might have taken that kind of thing. Did you find any makeup that indicated where she shopped? I wrote down some of the labels from her clothing."

"No makeup. Just an aspirin bottle and some baby powder. But I know what salon she went to. If you'll pardon the expression."

"Fine," said Walter. "We'll plan our next step when we get out of here. Which I think will be now. It's getting dark. And you don't want to turn on the lights."

We locked the front door and Walter replaced the key in the geranium pot. We found two metal trash bins parked near the kitchen door on the opposite side of the house from the driveway. They were empty.

"Which brings up something else," Walter said. "You put the garbage out by the street on pickup days. So we need to find out what days they come around. She had to have garbage. Even neat people have garbage. And if the pails were put out, then who put them back? Cops don't do that kind of work."

"Maybe there is a gardener," I offered. "I mean someone has to cut the grass."

"Yeah, but they cut it in Spanish," said Walter, "so you check it out."

I ignored the implied dig.

"I'll show you something else," he said, walking toward the street. "A clue. Maybe our only clue."

"What clue is that?"

Triumphantly, Walter pointed at the Nash Rambler. "Plates."

I turned away and started up the street. I had memorized the numbers when we first arrived.

12

Walter left me standing at a telephone booth, if you can believe that.

"I'm half an hour late to work already and you live in the wrong direction," is the way he graciously put it.

We had driven down Orlando to Melrose and parked at the curb. "Now this is what we got," he had said, thumbing his hat back on his head and flipping open his spiral notebook. "I'll check ownership of the house. Tomorrow at the Hall of Records. Also, I'll try to talk to the coroner to find out more about this was-she-or-wasn't-she-pregnant business. And one of us should go down to Union Station and see when the trains run to Iowa and if someone can remember selling her a ticket."

"You think she was going to Iowa?" I asked, surprised.

"According to her luggage tags anyway. Each suitcase had a tag, April Babich"—he fanned through his notebook—"124 Lone Tree Road, Ames, Iowa."

"Strange," I said. "What else?"

"What have you got?"

"Nothing to speak of. But I'm off tomorrow and I'll make some phone calls. Also, I think I'll go to the funeral Friday, see who's there. The license plate, by the way, is 6Z F 449."

"Did you write it down?" Walter wrote it down. "You got to write things down."

"I forget to write things down," I said. "I have—a photographic memory. Sort of."

Walter looked at me. "You have a photographic memory?"

I nodded uncomfortably. I had learned long ago that people were suspicious of people who could remember things. "But I have bad handwriting," I added, hoping to make up for it.

"Oh. Well, here." Walter ripped a sheet of paper from his notebook. "These are label names from her clothes. Like Haggerty's. You might go there and see if any of the salesgirls remember her. Find out if she shopped alone and how she paid. Maybe she had her bills sent to Seeberg." He jammed the notebook into a pocket inside of his leather jacket. "Okay? I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"What do you mean you'll talk to me tomorrow?"

"I'm dropping you here. I don't have time to run you home."

"You're going to leave me here?"

Walter dropped a nickel into my hand. "It's not like we're in Mongolia, kid. West Hollywood even has phones now. There's a booth right across the street. Go call your boy."

I glared at him.

Walter smiled charmingly. "I could really start to like you, Chandler. You learn to drive, we'll talk about it."

I didn't move. "What does my learning to drive have to do with anything that concerns you?"

Walter hunched over and switched on the ignition. His car coughed alarmingly before settling into a self-pitying whine. "Girls who slam doors and drive off in a huff really turn me on." He glanced at me. "Or am I getting too personal?"

I delivered the first part of his fantasy in two seconds flat.

Then I crossed the street without looking back.

I didn't start to cool down until I was soaking in a steamy bubble bath. Drinking a perfect Manhattan. Mrs. Keyes, wearing her reading glasses, her hair in crisp curls, sat on the toilet seat and conducted business.

"Mr. Goodwin called. He said he'd try back. Your mum called from Palm Springs. You should call her back. The gardener didn't come today, I don't know why."

"Probably his Spanish broke down." I was still sore.

"Also the Kleghorns want you to come to dinner Saturday night. And why am I answering the phone, 'Hello'?"

"Because someone may call who doesn't know who I am and would think it was peculiar if they heard 'Chandler residence.'"

"Why would someone call you if they didn't know you? What about the people who call who do know you?" She sniffed. "They'll think badly of me."

"I won't let them," I vowed.

"And I don't understand the sort of people you're running around with these days," said Mrs. Keyes, affronted.

"Me either. But I'll be in good company tonight. I'm going to the Whiteheads. I think I'll wear my gray silk suit."

My housekeeper nodded approvingly. "I'll go see if it needs a pressing." She left the bathroom humming. She was back on familiar ground.

It was the kind of party I loathed.

The Whiteheads, Mitchell and Susan, had swept into town eighteen months ago, riding a tired but never forsaken dream. Mitchell, short, portly, and officious, had "built" Indiana, or so he said, which meant he had cleaned up in some kind of real estate before the war, though what kind of real estate Indiana had I could not guess, then had whisked out here after the war to impress us.

His Indiana fortune had been sunk in the San Fernando Valley on a theory Mitchell had that someday people would actually want to live there. He had been buying up huge tracts of land and putting down boring little houses. Unfortunately, *that* kind of thing did little to impress West L.A., which already had a surfeit of Goldwyns and Warners and Zanucks and Howard Hughes, not to mention The Stars. Mitchell and Susan Whitehead were not having a good time.

Nevertheless. Money does cause talk. And no one could accuse the Whiteheads of not causing talk. At Christmas, for instance, they had thrown a blizzard. From somewhere, Indiana I suppose, they had imported fifty tons of snow, which they had dumped all over their backyard, then had rented a wind machine from one of the studios to blow it around. Last summer they had commandeered a circus.

I had no idea what kind of theme they had in mind for tonight, other than it was Mitchell's thirty-fifth birthday.

As Bret pulled up in front of the house on Benedict Canyon, I began to get cold feet. The Whiteheads would not be glad to see me. They would take it as an unspeakable insult that I, and not Etta Rice, had appeared. And I didn't feel like enduring this evening alone. I looked at Bret. He was wearing his "driver's" clothes, as he put it; a black suit and a white shirt. "How about if you take your cap off and come in with me," I said.

Bret twisted around, looking horrified. "Go in with you? But I have to watch the car."

"You don't have to watch the car. You can park it and the valet people can watch it."

"The valet people won't watch it," said Bret stubbornly. "And, well, I have things to do."

"What things do you have to do, sitting in the car, watching it?"

"Er, I've got an audition tomorrow." Bret held up a script. "I need to learn my lines."

"How many lines?"

"It's a fairly major part."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. See, I die first. But then I come back at the end. Briefly."

I chewed on my lip. "Okay, how about this. You come in with me for an hour. When we get home, I'll read with you."

"A whole hour?" said Bret, aggrieved.

"It's for your own good. You spend an hour in there, believe me, you'll want to die."

The Whiteheads had decided on a Parisian theme. Not exactly original, but it could have been worse. What it mainly involved was a brigade of serving people in black berets saying things like "Voulez-vous un toast point?" and a mournful-looking soul at the piano, plaintively pouring out torch songs in French.

"I must show you the centerpiece," breathed Susan Whitehead, after getting over the defeat of my arrival. "I do hope you brought a photographer." She glanced skeptically at Bret.

Susan was some kind of high school cheerleader, or had been, I'm not sure which. She was pretty and bony in a platinum-blond kind of way and carried in her head an up-to-the-minute head count of those she needed to use and those whose usefulness had since expired. At the moment, her dearest friends were the board of the symphony orchestra, the Everest of L.A. society, up which she was determinedly scaling.

Wearing a gold-lamé dress that someone must have funneled her into, Susan led me into the palatial dining room, which had been done up with striped canopies and small ice cream tables, bistro style. I was prodded over to a long table covered with a white linen cloth. There, in the center of it and enhanced by special lighting, soared an ice-carved Eiffel Tower, practically to the ceiling. Stationed on either side of the sculpture were two armed guards dressed in the uniforms of the gendarmes.

I stepped closer.

Frozen inside the Eiffel Tower, and sparkling like little lights, were Susan Whitehead's diamonds.

"My goodness," I said. "How—interesting."

"Isn't it?" Susan agreed. "Arnold Cross did it. He came up with the idea of the Eiffel Tower and I said, well Arnold, why not do it right? We'll fill it with jewels. So I went through all my drawers and things."

She smiled sweetly at me. "Luckily, I had enough."

I wondered if she would have killed herself if she hadn't. I said, "Is Mitchell a collector? I mean, keeping all these unset stones in the house."

"Oh no, they're not unset. I just took all of my stuff to the jeweler and he pried them out. After the party, he'll glue them back in."

"Er, you don't suppose the Eiffel Tower will melt?"

Susan threw back her head and laughed, showing off those healthy white teeth that people from the Middle West seem to have. "Oh no, darling. Arnold is so clever with ice, you know. Every half hour he covers the sculpture with a frozen cloth for five minutes. He says that should keep it going most of the night." She glanced at Bret. "Feel free to take all the pictures you want," she oozed. "Oh, look! There are the Beeches."

Bret was staring at the Eiffel Tower. I squeezed his arm. "It's safe now. You can laugh."

"Thirty-six, thirty-seven . . ."

"You're learning," I said and walked away.

The party drew several hundred people, but not the Hollywood heavyweights. It did, however, draw Arthur Heiman, who spotted me as I was eating something called a quiche Lorraine. "I must dance with you," he implored.

Arthur led me into another cavernous room that had been cleared of all furniture and redone with a dance floor and a five-piece band. "What do you suppose they'll do for his fortieth?" I whispered as he swept me onto the floor.

"China," said Arthur. "What else is left?"

I smiled. "That's a line Etta Rice would love."

"Oh," said Arthur, "do you know Etta?"

"A bit. How's your card game? Making a killing?"

"Not on a regular basis. How's your love life?"

"Not on a regular basis. Perhaps I should take up cards. Are there any eligible bachelors?"

Arthur showed his teeth. "Me."

"I'll definitely take up cards."

"Actually, we have a girl playing."

"Really? I bet your wives don't know that."

"Some crazy girl from the South. A real card-sharp. A cousin of somebody's. We decided to let her play one night for laughs."

"You mean someone just showed up with a cousin and you let her play?"

"Nooo," said Arthur. "She was brought as a sort of prize, you see."

"A prize?"

"Yeah."

"You mean a call girl."

"Whatever. Anyway, she watched us play a few hands and then Dr. Archer had an emergency. John Garfield had an impacted tooth. She said she knew a little about cards and why not count her in. She didn't have any money, of course."

"Of course, poor thing. All she had were favors. I like this, Arthur. You boys are very inventive."

"Yes, well. By the end of the evening she had us owing *her*. So we had no choice but to ask her back. Good old Tee. I'm afraid she can drink us under the table as well."

I said, "T-E-E?"

"Uh-huh. Tee Jones." He smiled charmingly. "Which takes care of the wife problem. Tee Jones could be any sex."

I stayed until ten. When I got home I phoned in the Eiffel Tower, including Bret's sworn statement that he had counted seventy-six diamonds. "The biggest was 5.88 carats," he announced. "A gendarme told me."

Which is when I began to worry. What if someone stole the diamonds after I left?

I phoned Susan Whitehead at 10:45, fifteen minutes before final-edition deadline. "I just want to thank you again," I said. "You'll see a mention in Etta's column tomorrow."

She could barely contain her disappointment that all of her jewels had bought only a mere mention. But at least she did not sound hysterical, as she would have if the jewels had been heisted. If they were stolen after eleven, it became tomorrow's second-edition problem.

I hung up with a relieved sigh. Only to find Bret sitting at the kitchen table drumming his fingers on his script.

I sighed again.

"Okay, John Barrymore, let's take it from the top."

13

The next morning, I sat at the kitchen table thumbing through the *Examiner*, Wednesday, January 15, looking for crime news. Something about Anne Bardon was nagging at the back of my mind, but I couldn't pull it out. Nothing more about the case, or the other two unsolved murders, had been reported, but the police had been busy nonetheless. The hair bandit, Jack the Snipper, had been apprehended at last.

According to the story, William Wayne Pyle, sixteen, had been nabbed at a bus stop. Which didn't surprise me. The way the buses ran, anybody who rode them would certainly pass some important milestone waiting for one to come along. "He was mad at several girlfriends and decided to take it out on others," the arresting officer said.

The police had also captured a man for forging jockey Eddie Arcaro's name to checks. A sharp-eyed bank teller suddenly became suspicious when he noticed that "Eddie Arcaro" was six-foot-two.

But nothing I read jiggled free the Anne Bardon thought. At nine o'clock I phoned my mother.

"But why can't you come for the weekend, darling? The weather is *absolutely* glorious," the conversation began.

"I have to work, Mom. It's my weekend to work."

"Work? On a weekend? I think this is unreasonable," my mother declared.

I could tell I was going to need additional fuel. "Anyway," I added quickly, "I have something Saturday night."

"Oh I knew you were holding back! Is it that charming Nick person?"

"Er, no. The Kleghorns next door have invited me to a dinner party."

"I see. Well I don't believe I know them." A pause. "Do they have someone suitable for you? Did they say?"

After which my mother began to babble about society in Palm Springs. My attention roamed to Mrs. Keyes, who was half in the oven, scrubbing away. I vaguely wished she would devote as much care to the food she put into it. I found a place to reenter the conversation. "Mom, I want to ask you about the Seebergs. What do you know about them?"

"The Seebergs? Why the usual, I suppose. Jack does very well, you know. And Helen is a lovely person. She sits on all the charity boards. I'm not sure I understand her taste in clothes, though."

I rolled my eyes and decided when my mother returned from Palm Springs, I would ask her to set up a lunch with Mrs. Seeberg.

"And I hope you're watching your weight, Paris. Did you remember to get on the scale this morning?"

"Um . . ."

"I'm sure I noticed an extra pound the other evening."

I told her I'd take care of it and eventually we hung up. Talking about the Kleghorns' dinner on Saturday night had finally jiggled the thought loose. Dinner. According to Nick's description, Anne Bardon had indeed had dinner at Romanoff's the Saturday before her death. She had dined at a very specific table, which she had told me about on the phone. So someone had to have made a reservation and requested that table.

It was too early to call Romanoff's, so I phoned Joan Kleghorn and accepted her invitation.

"Oh, that's great," she sang. "Mick insisted I invite this new man who just arrived from the East and who is supposed to be divine and I didn't know what to do because there are hardly any available girls. Then I remembered you. You are so good at table talk."

That's because your food's inedible, I wanted to say. Instead I asked, "Does this catch have a name?"

"Wade. Wade Green. He's dying to meet you."

I told her he could meet me on my doorstep at seven-thirty and hung up. I made a face.

"What's wrong?"

Mrs. Keyes had come over to the table and was looking at me with concern. She was wearing a pink housedress, and that, with her frizzed red curls, made her look like Little Orphan Annie's mother. "Nothing," I said.

Her eyes slid over to the plate of uneaten toast. "It's your energy, that's what's wrong. You don't eat enough to be cheerful."

I admitted I hadn't thought of that.

"Well you should. I'm going to make some oatmeal."

"I don't want oatmeal. I'm going to take a bath."

"You're always taking a bath."

"I *think* better in the bath."

I started up the stairs. Tee Jones. So that was how Nick had found out about the card cheating. Because his girlfriend played poker and had told him. Well la-di-da.

I paused at the landing. "But is she good at table talk?" I asked.

Of no one in particular.

An hour later, wrapped in my pink terry-cloth bathrobe and sitting on my bed, I dialed Hillside 6306. That was the number the reservations lady at Romanoff's had given me for Mr. Henry Tooker, the party who had booked Anne Bardon's table.

On the fifth ring, a muddied voice rasped, "Hullo?"

I said, "Hi, is this Mr. Tooker? Mr. Henry Tooker?"

He coughed. A clearer voice came over the line, "And who is this?"

"My name is Paris Chandler. I knew your friend Anne Bardon and I wondered if I could talk to you. Um. I didn't wake you, did I?" It was nearly eleven o'clock.

"I should take the phone off the hook. I work late. I don't know why I always forget." There was a lengthy self-pitying silence. "She's dead."

"Yes. I'm so sorry. I was wondering, did she mention me to you? I mean that night at Romanoff's. I thought she might because she was expecting me to drop by."

He began clearing his throat. "What did you say your name was?"

"Paris Chandler."

"I don't think she did. Who are you?"

"I was a . . . uh, confidante. She had asked me to do something for her. It's kind of complicated. Which is why I was hoping I could see you. Would that be possible?"

"Well she doesn't need it done now," he said bitterly.

"No."

He was silent so long I was afraid he might hang up. Then he said angrily, "Wait a minute. You mean she told you about me?"

He was a little slow on the uptake. I said, "I'll tell you all about it. When would be a good time?"

He hesitated. "I have to be at work at seven. We could have a drink, I suppose. Say about six?"

"Fine. And where do you work, Mr. Tooker? I could meet you nearby."

"At Mocambo. Do you know Ernie's down the street?"

I told him I did. "Six o'clock then?"

"At the bar," Henry Tooker emphasized.

I thanked him and hung up. Mocambo? But before I could wonder what Mr. Tooker did at Mocambo, Mrs. Keyes walked in and dropped the morning mail on the foot of my bed. She gave me a disapproving look. "I'll be wanting to clean your room soon, if that's okay with you."

"Sure," I said absently, sifting through the letters. "You can start in the bathroom. I won't be long."

I opened a long handwritten letter from a girlhood friend who had married a doctor in Ohio. I put it aside for later. A bill from my dentist, an invitation to a party. A small white envelope with no return address.

I slit open the envelope and unfolded a sheet of notebook paper.

> YOU WENT TO ANNE BARDON'S HOUSE YESTERDAY. I WATCHED YOU GO IN. I WATCHED YOU COME OUT. STUPID GIRL. DON'T TRY IT AGAIN.

I stared blindly at the clumsy printing, written with a dark, soft pencil. I felt a chill. Whoever had sent this, whoever had been watching, knew who I was, knew where I lived.

"Mrs. Keyes!"

Looking startled, she came hurrying out of the bathroom. "What?"

"This letter," I said, holding up the small white envelope. And then I hesitated. There was no postmark, or a stamp. I looked at her. "Um, this letter doesn't have a postmark, did you notice? I was wondering, did somebody deliver it?"

She took a step closer to the end of the bed. "No, miss. It was in the mailbox, with the others. I only went out just a while ago. Is . . . something wrong?" She peered at me uncertainly.

"Uh, no. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I was just, you know, curious." I gave her a strained smile. "It's okay."

She nodded and walked back into the bathroom.

It wasn't okay. I was frightened. I dialed Walter's number, wondering if he had received a letter, too. But there was no answer. I sat there on the bed, unsure what to do.

The phone rang. I scooped it up.

"Hi, partner. That is, if we're still partners."

"But why wouldn't we be?" I said with relief.

"A partner does not keep secrets from her partner," Nick Goodwin declared.

"Am I keeping a secret from you?" Hoping to sound calm.

"Anne Bardon was murdered. A week ago, according to the paper. I read it in the paper, yesterday. But then, it probably slipped your mind."

"Oh that," I said.

"That," Nick said.

"Well, don't be so huffy." Trying to concentrate now. "It really has nothing to do with you. Or the column. It's just something I'm working on." I pulled my legs up and burrowed under the covers. "You know. Like you're working on the card-cheating thing. How's that coming along by the way? Any new leads?"

"Not really."

"Then perhaps I should have dinner with Arthur again. I love having dinner with Arthur."

"I'm at Etta's house," said Nick sharply. "I can't tie up the phone."

"Okay. But listen, Nick. You want me to have dinner with Arthur, I will. I saw him the other night. I saw him last night, actually."

"Last night? Did he say anything?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't think so. Only that they're letting a girl play. Interesting, isn't it? But I won't keep you."

"Listen, Paris—"

"So long," I said. "Partner." And hung up.

My fingers were like ice. And then I remembered what my psychic had said. The first three weeks of the year nothing was going to go right, Mrs. Blume had warned me. I decided to get a second opinion.

I dialed the number for Utley Mazer.

". . . It is best to stay out of the limelight today, Aries. Spend a quiet day at home. If you must travel, drive carefully!"

14

"Shall I wait for you here, Miss Paris?" said Mrs. Keyes from under her head scarf.

We were parked in front of Union Station in her prewar Chevy, which had not stood the test of time gracefully. After a harrowing drive down Sunset to get here, I was not about to get back in her car, ever.

"I may be a while," I said. "I'll take a cab home." I squeezed her arm and bolted from the car.

Bret, I had forgotten, was off somewhere auditioning "for a fairly major part."

The station was teeming with people. I paused inside the main entrance waiting for my eyes to adjust. The cathedral-like soaring windows were covered with long white venetian blinds, and the stark chandeliers, plummeting from the vaulted ceiling, offered only a dim glow. The building felt cool and inviting.

I edged forward. All of the brown leather chairs in the waiting rooms were occupied; men in military uniforms shuffled through long lines at the ticket counter. The soldiers were still coming home.

"Now boarding, the *El Capitan* for Sheee-ca-go! Track number five. And on track number six, the *Grand Canyon*, also for Sheee-ca-go! All aboard please!"

I stood there for a moment trying to figure out how to proceed. Three different railroads operated out of the station. The Union Pacific, the Santa Fe, and the Southern Pacific all had their own ticket windows. There were twenty-five windows, operating twenty-four hours a day. I did not like this at all.

I waited in line at the information kiosk and learned that nothing went directly to Ames. But two lines, the Santa Fe and the Union Pacific, had trains leaving L.A. which connected with other trains in Kansas City or Omaha, and which, I supposed, somehow got a person to Iowa.

Armed with schedules, I began trooping from one window to the next. After an hour, I still had two windows to go, and no more patience, when I found the ticket seller who remembered Anne Bardon. The man who remembered her was a tall, cheerful fellow with thinning hair and rimless glasses. A plastic tag, pinned to his shirt, said Mr. Boone. He remembered her, he said, because of her alluring perfume. He said he had teased her about it.

"And then I read in the paper she's dead," he sighed, shaking his head.

I pushed my *Examiner* press card under the window. "I'm trying to write about her last days," I told him. "Maybe you could help me with some information."

"Sure. Go ahead. Everything's pretty fresh in my mind 'cause I had to tell it all to the police."

"The police were here? When?"

"Yesterday, miss, asking about her, just like you."

"A Sergeant Beame, is that who you talked to?"

"That's the one, miss. Came in yesterday."

"And when did she come in? To buy her ticket, I mean."

"It was January the second. I thought it was more recent than that, but when I looked it up, her ticket was written on the second."

The second. The day before she showed up at the *Examiner*. "And she bought just the one ticket," I said. "To Ames."

"Oh no," said Mr. Boone. "She bought a ticket for a sleeping car on the *Super Chief* to Chicago."

"Would she have to go to Chicago to get to Ames?"

"Ames, Iowa? She wasn't going to Ames, Iowa. She was going to Chicago. Actually beyond. Because she also reserved a sleeping car on the *Twentieth Century Limited.* She was going to New York City."

I hesitated. "Are you sure? We might not be talking about the same girl."

"Nope. This was the girl. She told me she was headed for Broadway."

"Do you remember the date she was leaving, Mr. Boone?"

"Yep. January the eighth. Wednesday. *Super Chief* leaves at eight P.M. Gets into Chicago midday on the tenth."

"And she was going to New York that night?"

"If my memory's still good."

"Is it possible that someone used her ticket? Would you know if the compartment was occupied on that train?"

"I'd have to look it up and I can't right now," Mr. Boone said. "But I'll check on my dinner break, which is between four-thirty and five. I'm off at eight. If you care to come back."

I said I would do that.

"It's funny," Mr. Boone went on. "She mentioned she had a lot of luggage, would that be a problem?" He smiled wistfully. "Not if she wore that perfume, I said."

I bought the *Express* and the salmon-colored *Daily News* and waltzed them into Fred Harvey's, where I ordered a melted cheese and fries. But I never looked at the papers. Instead I wondered what had become of the train tickets that Anne Bardon never used. Whoever killed her had presumably made off with her money and her address book. Why not the tickets?

After eating most of the sandwich, I asked for coffee and a piece of apple pie. I didn't know whom I was spiting, my mother or my housekeeper. But I felt better after eating it. It was two-thirty. I didn't feel like going home. Instead I went to the telephone room. Mrs. Keyes had apparently survived the return trip and told me that Walter Ainsley had called. And so had Nick.

"Did they leave messages?" I asked.

"Mr. Goodwin did. Something' about a murder, he said."

"He already delivered that message."

"Something about a girl being sliced in half."

* * *

I caught a cab and rode over to the *Examiner*. As soon as we pulled up in front of the castle, I could see something was going on. A knot of people were bunched on the sidewalk, staring through the plate-glass windows to where the printing presses were already in high gear. I glanced at my watch. The first edition didn't go to press until six; we were obviously putting out an Extra.

Two photographers with Speed Graphics strapped around their necks pushed past me as I walked into the lobby. I climbed the thirty-seven stairs and had just reached the second-floor landing when a gun went off. My heart leaped. It went off again, *pop, pop!*

"Shut *up*!" barked a man's voice.

Cautiously I ventured into the newsroom. Everyone was frozen still and staring toward the copy desk at the back of the room.

Four of the rim slots were taken by the usual rewrite crew, including Walter. All eyes were turned to the fifth slot, occupied by a soft-spoken feature writer named Bob Pierce. He was sitting at the desk, wearing a telephone headset and scribbling furiously in his notebook.

Sweat was pouring down his face. "You say she liked to play with dolls? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Oh, I see."

My eyes climbed upward. Behind Pierce was Fred Dickinson. The city editor was standing there with his right arm thrust in the air, a cap pistol clenched in his hand.

I crept closer. A copy boy, bending over one of the wire machines, suddenly shouted, "A.P.'s got her name!"

Pop, pop! "I said shut *up*!"

Bob Pierce said, "Came to California during the war, uh-huh. Right."

Proceeding with extreme caution, I inched over to Walter. I leaned down and whispered, "What—"

Bang, bang! I flinched. "Shhh!"

"Looking for a job, uh-huh . . ."

Now I was stuck there, bent over Walter, terrified even to breathe. I kept an eye on Fred's trigger finger.

"And you haven't heard from her lately? Oh. Since Christmas, I see. Yes, ma'am, a Hollywood beauty contest. That's right. Er, hang on."

Bob Pierce looked up at Fred with panic in his eyes. "What now?" he whispered hoarsely.

"You got everything you need? You sure now?"

Pierce nodded weakly. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pants pocket and began mopping the sweat off his face. Fred lowered his gun hand. "Then tell her her daughter's dead." He tossed the cap pistol onto the copy desk and stalked away.

"What?" I said to Walter.

Walter shook his head.

Pierce cleared his throat. "Uh, Mrs. Short? Uh, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Mrs. Short. But I needed to find out about your daughter. See, something bad has happened to her. I'm sure the police will be calling you any minute. Er, I beg your pardon? No, Mrs. Short. Elizabeth didn't win a beauty contest. She's been murdered. I'm sorry. Er . . . good-bye!"

With shaking fingers, Bob Pierce pulled off his headset and lurched to his feet. "Sweet Jesus," he said.

Walter stood up. "You did great. Go have a drink, Pierce, but come right back. I need your story in an hour."

He grinned. "Did you see that, kid? Great reporting, just great!"

As if someone had flipped a switch, the newsroom burst into frenzied action. Amid the clatter of typewriters and the cacophony of high-pitched voices, came Jo's from her glassed-in booth: "Bill White! Phone call! Marvin! Where are you? *Phone call!*" Walter clapped a hand on my shoulder. "Whatsa matter, you don't look so good. Come on, we'll go across the street."

I reached across his desk and picked up the cap gun. I straightened, pointing it toward the floor. I pulled the trigger. It snapped.

The last cap had been used.

One door down from the drugstore on the corner of Eleventh and Broadway was Gallagher's coffee shop. At almost any hour, you could find *Examiner* staffers on break. If Jo were in a good mood, she might forward an important call there.

Ruth, the day-shift waitress, slapped down two chipped mugs of steaming coffee on the white Formica counter and waddled back to her umpteenth doughnut of the day. She was the shop's best customer.

I said to Walter, "Who was the girl?"

"Someone named Elizabeth Short. They found her body on an empty lot this morning, not too far from here. Severed at the waist. Every off-duty cop's been called back in. Women all over the city are hysterical."

He said it as if being hysterical over a gruesome murder was a gender-related condition. I opened my purse. I pulled out my wallet and a comb. "Why did he lie to her? Why didn't he say her daughter had been killed?" I took out my handkerchief.

"Because she might have fainted. Then where'd we be? Where we are now is a hot exclusive. Believe me, the mother won't be talking to any more reporters today."

I shook out my lipstick. "Do you think it was the same man who killed Anne Bardon?"

"I do not," declared Walter cheerfully. "She was shot. This woman was hacked to death. Killers stick to proven methods. Did you find out anything today?"

I told him what I had learned at the train station and how I had phoned Romanoff's to get the name of her dinner companion that Saturday night. "A Henry Tooker. I don't know what his connection was, but I'm meeting him at six o'clock." I dug out a mechanical pencil and my perfume.

Walter sipped his coffee. "Anything else?"

Yes, there was something *else*. The letter. But if Walter had received one also, he would have said so. And now, looking at him, I began to have second thoughts. If I told him, he might overreact, get panicky, tell me I should drop the whole thing. At this point I wasn't ready to. And even if there was a single killer stalking the city, he had, so far, only stalked women he had found alone. I, it seemed, was never alone.

So I told Walter about Lauralee Hart, having neglected to do so the other day. "I didn't bring up Anne's name," I said. "But I think I'll try to see Lauralee tomorrow. We exchanged phone numbers." I grinned. "She thinks I'm a fellow traveler." I shook my purse. I was obviously out of cigarettes.

"That's fine, Paris. Just fine. I learned a little, too. First. The house Anne Bardon was living in was owned by—you ready for this?"

"Jack Seeberg," I supplied.

"Try Helen."

"Helen?"

"Helen Seeberg is the daughter of Morris Kantor, the Canadian lumber tycoon, which means she's rolling in dough. Some of that dough she's sunk into real estate. Office buildings, apartment houses. Houses. Now here's the cute part. Her investment guy is also Jack's. So he puts his girls in places she owns. The girls pay the rent to the investment guy, or Jack does, and the wife never knows who the renter is. She just sees the statements."

I stared at Walter. "How did you find this out?"

"Real estate guy I know told me about the wife's holdings. I called one of the office buildings she owns, got the manager and found out where the checks are sent. To Floyd Richardson, esquire. He's over on Seventh. I called him up. I yakked. I found out."

I signaled Ruth for more coffee. "How clever," I said. "But where does it lead us?"

"At the moment, it's just another thread. You collect thread. Then you sew it all together. You get a frock."

I reached for one of his Camel's, lying on the counter. "Do that again, Walter, okay?"

"Do what again?"

"I don't happen to sew." He looked at me blankly. "Like what would you have said to a man, Walter?"

Walter patted his pocket and handed me a book of matches. "Well, let's see. You pick up yardage. You make downs. You score." He looked at me expressionlessly. "And you light your own cigarette."

15

Henry Tooker was not at the bar when I walked into Ernie's—Fine Eatery and Spirits, the blue neon said—at five after six. That is, he wasn't, unless he was the peroxided number in the purple shantung suit drinking by herself on the only occupied stool at the bar. I made it two occupied stools and stared at my reflection in the streaked mirror over the bottles.

A grease-splattered menu was laying on the bar in front of me. It listed sandwiches and steaks and a few desserts, including Ernie's Encredible Ice Cream Sundae, "for those who dare!" Given the sour smell of old alcohol in the place, I doubted anyone had dared recently.

At the moment, in fact, nobody was even daring to walk in. It was just me and peroxide bottle three stools down. I had no idea how Henry Tooker had fit into Anne Bardon's life, but considering this choice of bars, it couldn't have been much of a fit.

A bartender with his back to me had been drying glasses and eyeing me in the grimy mirror. I eyed myself back. I looked debauched, either from the mirror or the light, or some hidden part of my soul that had suddenly flared up. The bartender took his time coming over.

"You want something?" He looked at me unenthusiastically. He was a dark-haired, burly man with white sleeves rolled up and a face that looked as rough as his whiskey.

"I thought I'd have a drink."

He gave me the once-over. "You alone?"

"Hopefully not for long."

"Uh-huh. Well I'll have to ask you to sit over there at one of those tables. We don't serve dames by themselves after six." He jerked his head in the direction of a clock behind the bar. "It's after six."

"What happens after six?" I said. "Do women turn into vampires?"

"They turn into trouble. You want a drink, lady, go sit down."

I got off the stool and walked over to one of the small square tables positioned in a row alongside the bar. I sat down. The woman at the bar pulled her face out of her glass and said, "For Chrissake, Joe, bring the lady a drink."

Joe said, "Okee. What'll it be, sweetheart?"

I turned. "Are you speaking to me?"

"No, I'm speaking to Mrs. Roosevelt."

"Sorry," I said. "My mistake."

Joe planted his hands on the bar and leaned over. "Look, lady, you want a drink or not?"

"Yes please. I'd like a very big glass, okay? Three ice cubes, water and a twist of lemon."

The bartender just stared at me. "You want water? We don't serve water. Jesus Christ."

"Not even if I drink it at the table?" I batted my eyelashes.

Joe whipped around the bar and arrived at my table in a flash. He had an apron tied around his waist. He had arms like Popeye. "Look, lady, you want a drink, order a drink. Otherwise, out."

"I think I'll just eat the peanuts," I said, glancing down at a plastic bowl in front of me. "They can't be more than three months old."

Joe's face reddened. "That's it. Outta here!"

The blonde had turned full around on the stool and seemed to be enjoying the show. It was getting a bit ridiculous. I could wait in the car, assuming Bret hadn't tooled off somewhere. I was on my feet when the door opened and in walked a round-faced man wearing a double-breasted maroon suit with bright blue stripes and a blue felt hat. He had a paisley tie with a lot of blue in it and a matching handkerchief billowing out of his breast pocket. He was carrying a black trumpet case.

"Miss Chandler?"

"Hello," I called out.

He stepped closer. He had one of those flat, plain small-town faces that wouldn't get wise until middle age. It was the suit that made him look like a cheap crook.

Joe said skeptically, "You know this dame, Henry?"

Henry walked over to the table looking perplexed. I said, "How are you, Henry? I suppose we could sit here, although—"

"Sure," said Henry agreeably.

"Jeez," said Joe. And walked away.

I sat down. Henry put his trumpet case on the floor and sat across from me. He pulled off his hat. "Sorry I'm late. My car broke down so I had to take the bus. Have you had a drink?" I shook my head. "I come here all the time," he said.

He glanced around as if to confirm that he came here all the time. Joe was back polishing glasses. "Say, Joe," said Henry Tooker. "You working tonight, big fella?"

"I'll have a Manhattan," I said to Tooker. "And a glass of water."

He got up and went over to the bar. Moments later he came back carrying the drinks himself. He poured a 7-Up into a glass and said, "I never drink before I play. It gets me all messed up."

Henry Tooker was one of those men who, perhaps because of his round face and the bit of extra weight he carried, appeared older than he was. He could have passed for mid-thirties, but I suspected he was ten years younger. He had clear brown eyes and baby-smooth skin and a strand of brown hair that seemed preordained, as if by the hair god, to dangle down his forehead.

I said, "Thanks for coming, Henry. I know you must be terribly upset. Let me tell you who I am and then maybe we should go somewhere else."

He looked at me with surprise.

I smiled. "It's kind of quiet in here."

"That's no problem," he said. But he looked a bit edgy.

"I work at the *Los Angeles Examiner.*"

He looked definitely edgy. I touched his hand. "I'm sorry. I assumed Anne had told you. No? We were working on a story. Does that ring a bell?"

"A story," Henry said blankly. "No."

"About struggling young actresses in Hollywood."

I had thought this one out. He hadn't seemed to recognize my name on the phone, so it was possible he knew nothing of Anne Bardon's attempt to plant the phony Item. Assuming his ignorance, I didn't want to stray too far from the truth concerning my connection to Anne. And I wanted him to know I worked for a paper. But if he didn't know about the Item, I wasn't going to tell him, at least not until I got a fix who he was. He could have been Jack Seeberg's limo driver for all I knew.

Henry continued to look uncomfortable. I said, "She told me a bit about herself and I came to like her. You can imagine how shocked and upset I was when I read that she had been killed. Henry, I want to finish this story. It deserves to be written. Any help you can give me I would greatly appreciate."

Henry sat there, his hand clutching his 7-Up glass. He seemed to struggle to get his words out. "She told you about me?" he said hoarsely. "For a story?"

I nodded.

Two men had come in and were telling jokes with Joe.

Henry glanced over at them. "Frankly," he said, "I'm shocked."

"A lot of what she told me was off the record," I quickly inserted.

Henry leaned forward. "Did she tell you about, uh, you know. Her arrangement?"

"Yes. With Jack, if that's what you mean. It's an old story, Henry. But no one has written it yet."

I ignored the water and went for the Manhattan. He went for the 7-Up.

"I don't see how you can write about Anne," he told me. "I just don't."

"A lot of things are going to come out anyway. And I think we ought to do it right, don't you?"

"Joe!" said Henry. "Bring me a whiskey, neat, no ice." He turned his attention back to me, looking at me with those clear, steady eyes. Then he closed them and bit his lip. He stayed that way for so long I thought maybe he was undergoing some exotic form of meditation. Then his eyes popped open and he said, "I'm not sure where to start. But I assume she told you about the baby. Otherwise you wouldn't have known about me."

Joe slammed Henry's whiskey on the table; Henry grabbed it. I watched him take a gulp, confused. Thinking, a doctor? He was her *doctor*?

"I mean," said Henry Tooker, "you wouldn't have known about me, how could you have? Unless she told you I was the father."

I dove for the Manhattan. I took such a big gulp that I began to cough.

"Are you okay?" said Henry. I wasn't okay. He got up and came around and began slapping me on the back. When the coughing stopped, he handed me the glass of water.

"Strong stuff," I said, still gasping. Then, "Yes. She told me about the baby. What she didn't go into, really, was how you two got together in the first place."

Henry consulted his watch. "Look, this is not fun for me, Miss Chandler. I'm still in a state of shock. Would you mind if we went for a walk? Just along Sunset a little. I could use some fresh air."

I said that was fine with me.

* * *

"Bret, stop right here, and run in and get us some hamburgers. French fries, too. And Cokes, okay?"

Bret swerved into Dolores's Drive-in at Wilshire and La Cienega. I leaned back in the soft leather seat. "Hamburger okay with you?"

Henry Tooker nodded. He still looked uncomfortable, as he might well. When we left Ernie's, I had sort of rammed him into the back of the Bentley, which, for once in my life, was right where I wanted it to be, driver included. I had sweetly suggested we *ride*, a euphemism, as I saw it, for the kidnapping of Henry Tooker. Now that I had him, I wanted to make sure he couldn't get away.

Henry glanced nervously at his watch. "I have to be at work by seven and it's already—"

"No problem," I said. "We'll just sit here and eat and then we'll drop you off." I smiled. "Now, let us continue. You were saying . . ."

"You're not going to use my name, you promised you wouldn't. How can I be sure you won't? I mean, you're not even writing this down. Aren't you supposed to write it down?"

"We're just having a little chat, Henry. Nothing written down. Stop worrying."

"No," said Henry excitedly. " He'll kill me. Don't you see? He killed her and now he wants to kill me."

"Who wants to kill you?"

"Jack Seeberg. I told you that before. I wish you would write this down."

We had already, as Bret meandered through the streets of West Hollywood, covered Act One. The Meeting. According to Henry, he had met Anne more than a year ago at Mocambo, soon after he had gone to work there, playing the trumpet. She had come in one night with a friend, a girl named Elizabeth whom Henry had met in Europe when he was touring with the Glenn Miller band. During his break he had joined them at their table. Anne, he said, had knocked him out like no other girl ever had. He asked if he could see her home later that night. Anne said no, but that he could call her the next day, and she gave him the number at the Maribou Arms.

"I really didn't think anything would happen," he had told me. "I mean I'm a fairly realistic guy. Here I was, this hick from Nevada trying to make the big time. I had no money. I was living in a rooming house. I mean I'd come to L.A. on a bus at the end of '45. And here was this knockout dame who you could tell played with the big boys. But I was smitten, so I called, and to my surprise she agreed to see me."

From the beginning, Anne had been up front about her relationship with Jack Seeberg and her firm intention to keep it going. But whether it was out of loneliness or boredom, she made room in her life for Henry. "We talked on the phone a lot," he had said. "And once a week we would meet somewhere."

Where?

"At a friend of her's place."

Which friend?

"I'd rather not say."

This was when?

"Last winter."

Okay, fine.

It was not smooth sailing . . . at all. Anne could be nasty. Sometimes she would show up at Mocambo with Elizabeth and deliberately flirt with men right in front of Henry. Other times she would not answer his calls for weeks. But Henry persisted, and eventually she would turn sweet again.

She was always careful, though, to keep up the pretense of loyalty to Jack Seeberg. She never went out with a man in public, and once she moved into the Orlando Avenue house, never allowed Henry to phone her there. He had to leave messages with girlfriends.

Now, as we sat in Dolores's parking lot, I asked once more—what girlfriends, what were their names?

"I won't say."

"This is kind of annoying, Henry."

"I shouldn't be telling you any of this, at all."

"Sorry."

"Anyway, I moved into a little apartment house a block from where she was living. During her lunch hour, when Seeberg didn't need her, she'd slip out her back door, cut through the hedges, and sneak into my place."

I glanced out the window. Bret was just turning away from the customer window carrying our food.

I looked back at Henry. "Was she good in bed?"

Henry turned bright red. Even in the dark, you could see he was bright red.

"Aw come on, Henry. You weren't playing bridge in there. And she must have been good in bed for you to put up with the situation. I mean, she was seeing another man."

"She was seeing Jack Seeberg because he bought her things and Anne liked nice things," Henry said stiffly. "But it was me she loved."

"Uh-huh."

"And sex had nothing to do with it. Whatsoever."

"It didn't?"

"No. It was this . . ." His hands fluttered upward, then fell to his lap as if they couldn't finish the sentence either. "This beautiful, almost spiritual thing. She said I was the first man she ever loved."

"Still, you had to have been jealous, Henry. Come on. Even a little bit?"

"Of course not," said Henry defiantly. "Why should I be? It was me she loved, I told you. It was like . . . having an affair with a married woman."

Yeah sure.

Bret opened Henry's door and handed in the food. His audition must have gone well. He wasn't even carping about the money he had just shelled out.

I watched Henry slather ketchup on his Jumbo Jim. Like an affair with a married woman. Anne's words, undoubtedly. Tooker was a naive, impressionable young man who wouldn't have the faintest clue how to deal with a situation like this one. On the other hand, who knew what lines Anne Bardon had been feeding him.

"So, Henry. Tell me about the baby, okay?" It was quarter to seven and we had lots more to go.

"Well, I must admit, I was stunned when Anne told me she was pregnant. She told me on Christmas day. Wasn't that perfect?"

"Yes, Henry. And what were her plans?" Somehow I couldn't imagine the little ingenue gamely moving into his apartment.

"We were going to go to Iowa to get married. And then we were going to go to New York. She thought she'd get a job on Broadway and I was going to find work in one of the clubs."

"You were going to New York to get away from Seeberg, is that it?"

Henry nodded as he chewed a french fry. He swallowed. "See, Anne was going to leave first. She bought a train ticket for Wednesday, January eighth. I would come the following week, and we were going to be—"

Henry gulped. He began making small choking noises and I thought he must have caught some food in his throat. Then he began to cry. Loud, wet, sobbing noises. "Here," I murmured, patting his cheek with a napkin. "It's okay. Just take your time, Henry."

Henry took the napkin out of my hand and blew his nose. "We were going to be married on Sunday," he sniffled. "That's . . . this Sunday."

I chewed on my hamburger for a while. It was seven minutes till seven. The big clock on the dash was hard to ignore. I leaned over the front seat. I said, "Bret, run down the street and get me a pack of cigarettes, okay? Then we'll drop Henry off."

"I don't want to be late," Henry said anxiously.

"You won't be," I promised. The keys to the car were on the seat beside Bret. I casually draped my right arm over the seat and picked them up. Then I carefully brought my closed hand up and dropped the keys into the container holding my french fries. I leaned back in the seat. "I have to ask you, Henry. About money. How you were going to get by until you both found work."

Henry stuck his chin out. "I can't go into that."

"No, well, all right."

I nibbled a french fry. "So let me get this straight now. Anne was going to sneak out of town. Old Jack would just kind of show up one day and find her gone. Was that it?"

"Not exactly," Henry said.

"No, I didn't think so." Two more french fries. "Maybe she told Seeberg she was pregnant, you think, Henry? Sort of let him think she was pregnant by him."

Henry's head jerked around. "What are you getting at?"

"Actually, that's what she told me. So here's the thing. Maybe she was getting some money from Seeberg to have the baby. I mean, to help with her expenses."

"Oh God," moaned Henry. "It's seven o'clock. Look, where is that fellow?"

"He's coming. Am I right, by the way?"

Henry began to gnaw on his bottom lip. "Well, okay, yes. He was going to give her a little money."

"So he knew she was leaving town, Henry? Was it Seeberg's idea that Anne go back to Iowa to have the baby?"

Henry nodded. "Yes, that was it. He wanted her to have the baby there. Then he would send for her. He wanted to be able to see his child."

I sipped my Coke through a straw. I said, "You mean the child he thought was his."

"Yes. I really wish that fellow would hurry up."

"How do you know it was your child?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry. It's what I do, you know. Ask rude questions. But you must have wondered . . ."

Henry drew back his lips into a tight little smile. "I never wondered. Believe me."

"All right. But look, could Seeberg have found out? I mean you said you thought he killed her. Why would he kill her unless . . . oh. Here comes Bret now. See? He's there, walking toward us."

"Yes, that's it," Henry said. "I think he found out. I think she must have told him when she went to collect the—"

"How much was it, Henry? You see, I'm only trying to help. You need my help if you want to get Jack. Unless, of course, you have talked with the police."

"No, no. Not yet. I . . ."

Bret opened the front door and got in. "Here's your cigarettes, Miss Chandler."

I took the pack of Chesterfield's from him. "Okay, Bret. Let's step on it. To Mocambo." I pulled the cellophane ribbon off the pack, dug out a cigarette and lit it. I exhaled. "How much was it, Henry? A couple thousand? More?"

Henry was staring at Bret. "What's going on?"

I tapped Bret on the shoulder. "Let's go. We're in a hurry."

"I can't seem to find the keys. I thought they were here." He was patting the front seat. Then he was bending over, searching the floor.

I said, "Maybe you left them at the window when you were buying the hamburgers. Go check."

Bret turned and gave me a funny look. Brain dead as he often was, he was fastidious about the keys. Slowly he climbed out of the car.

I touched Henry's knee. "Sorry. We'll be there in a jiffy though. So it was more. Five thousand? I suppose you could get by on that. But personally I would have asked for more."

Henry sat there staring straight ahead.

"I mean the guy has dough. And if he knocked her up—"

Henry's head spun around. "He didn't knock her up."

"No, but he thought he did. I mean five thousand, in New York City. I don't know, Henry. Rents are high." Five thousand could have rented him the Plaza Hotel, but he wouldn't know that. "And in New York you've got to go out at night. And the way they dress there, well . . . I think she got taken."

"Ten thousand."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said it was ten thousand." He had begun to sweat.

"Ten *thousand*? You're pulling my leg, Henry. That's quite a sum of money."

"Anne was good at getting what she wanted," he said dully.

"Mm. But what happened to the money? Did she give it to you?"

"Of course not."

"No? Then where is it?"

"I don't know."

"How odd, don't you think? But then, maybe Jack never gave her the money. Maybe Jack double-crossed her."

Henry sighed. "Seeberg gave her the money, she told me."

Bret came back. "Not there," he said gloomily. "I just don't understand."

"Well you obviously left them where you bought the cigarettes," I said sharply. "Please hurry, Bret. This isn't cute."

My chauffeur gave me a mortified look and took off on the run. I watched him. I had never seen him move at a faster pace than a languid beach stroll.

"Henry, I can't apologize enough. But listen. When was the last time you saw Anne?"

"I was supposed to see her off at the train station." His head was turned. He was following Bret's loping progress down the street.

"So you went to the train station and she wasn't there. Weren't you worried?"

He had his hand on the door handle. "Maybe I'd better walk."

"You'll get there faster in the car. Honestly. Just relax."

Henry sank dejectedly into the seat. "Of course I was worried. Then I thought maybe she had missed the train, or had taken another train, and I was confused. I kept calling, but there was no answer. So I waited until Sunday and I called her family in Iowa. I didn't want to alarm them. So I made up some story about being an old friend and just trying to look her up. They gave me her address in L.A. It was obvious she wasn't expected there."

"And so on Monday you phoned the police."

"Yes." He took a deep breath. "Do you really think you can help me, Miss Chandler?"

"Henry," I said, "which train was she taking to Iowa?"

"The *Super Chief*. At eight o'clock."

"And you were going on the *Super Chief*, too? To Iowa?"

"Well, you had to get off in Kansas City and switch."

"Did Anne buy your ticket, or did you?"

"Anne did. She said I could pick it up an hour before the train left. Why?"

I didn't answer. I draped my hand over the front seat and carefully dropped the keys onto it. A moment later, a breathless and miserable-looking Bret returned. He found the keys on the front seat, silly boy.

Where they'd been sitting all along.

16

"Don't be mad at me," I said as we shot down Sunset. "It was sort of spur of the moment."

Silence.

"Actually, considering your line of work, I would call it improvisational."

We flew across Crenshaw. I twisted around and tried to see out the back window. If anybody had been following me, even a murderer, Bret had left him in the exhaust fumes. I turned back. "And remind me to pay you for the food, okay?"

More silence. He had to be going fifty.

"Bret, what is the matter with you? At least tell me how the tryout went."

An audible sniff. "You don't care."

"Of course I care. Did you get a callback? The way you died in the kitchen last night was great." I grabbed the safety strap.

Silence. Then, sullenly, "You could have asked me before, Miss Chandler. I mean I picked you up at the paper and I drove you all the way to Ernie's and you never said a word. You're a very cold, uncaring person."

Oh swell. I began to stew. Tomorrow, no matter what, I was going to sign up for automobile driving lessons, absolutely, for sure. But tomorrow was still many miles off.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "But I was upset. You know that girl who was murdered today? Well some guy at the paper called her mother, who didn't even know yet, and told her he was writing a story about her daughter because she'd won a beauty contest. Then, when he'd squeezed every last bit of information out of this poor woman, *then* he tells her, sorry, lady, your daughter's really dead. So I was thinking—in the car I mean—how maybe I shouldn't be in this business. And I was depressed. And I wish you would slow *down*."

Bret stopped the car altogether, though he did remember to do it at a curb, and turned around. He looked at me sweetly. "I don't think you're in the wrong business, Miss Chandler. You were great with that guy. I couldn't believe how you talked to him. And the key thing? I knew all along what you were doing, I really did."

"You did?"

"I did after I got back and saw them on the seat. I figured it out." He smiled. "Maybe you should be the one going to auditions."

"Oh dear," I said. "Bad news?"

"I got a callback."

"Why that's wonderful!"

"Yeah, but so did four other guys." He turned back to the steering wheel. "Anyone can die well."

Union Station was even busier at this time of night than it had been during my earlier visit. All those trains heading east, I guess. Mr. Boone was at his window. But so were three people waiting in line.

I walked over to the newsstand and bought early editions of the *Examiner*, the *Herald Express*, and the *Times*. Then I slipped into line and began reading the first reports of Elizabeth's Short's murder. Walter was probably right that there was no connection between Anne's death and this one. But all the same, I wondered where Jack Seeberg had been Tuesday night. Both murders had occurred on a Tuesday night or early on Wednesday morning. After ten minutes, there were still two people in front of me.

I waited some more. Each of them seemed determined to require tickets for complicated journeys with families of sixteen. Eventually I stepped up to the barred window.

Mr. Boone adjusted his glasses. "I had a chance to look through the records on my dinner break. No one was in that compartment when the train left Los Angeles. That's all I know."

"Is it possible that Anne Bardon could have planned to get off the train in Kansas City?"

"It's a free country," said Mr. Boone. "But why would she spend all that money to go to New York if she were only going to Kansas City?"

"Could she have gotten a refund in Kansas City?"

"For the *Twentieth Century Limited*. But once you've reserved a sleeping car on the *Super Chief*, and you are on the *Super Chief*, you can't get a refund because you feel like getting off early." Mr. Boone glanced impatiently over my shoulder. I was holding up the line. "Anyway, if she wanted to go to Kansas City, she should have just bought a ticket to Kansas City."

I smiled apologetically. "Just one more thing, Mr. Boone. Could you check the passenger list for tonight's *Super Chief*? I'm looking for a reservation under the name of Henry Tooker."

"Tooker? Hang on."

I didn't know why I was bothering. If Anne Bardon intended to double-cross Henry by not going to Ames in the first place, why would she have reserved a car for him? "Lady, I'm trying to make a train," whined a disgruntled voice behind me.

Mr. Boone was thumbing through a large black cardboard-bound ledger. He paused at the top of one lined page and ran his finger down the scrawled names.

"Yep. Tooker, Henry. Compartment eleven."

"Are you serious? How far is he going?"

"Booked through to Chicago." Mr. Boone snapped the book shut. "Track five." He glanced at the big station clock. "She'll be pulling out just about now."

I hurried back to the front of the terminal, turned left, pushed through the crowd in the waiting room and ran out the double doors under the sign marked TRACKS. I raced along the pedestrian subway and up the ramp to No. 5. I stopped and caught my breath in the cool night air.

A couple of station porters were pushing empty luggage carts along the deserted platform. Not fifty feet away, amid swelling, billowing plumes of steam, and the grunting *thuda, thuda, thuda* of the great engine, shone the red lights on the back of the caboose. The *Super Chief* was on its way.

By the time I got back to the ticket concourse, Mr. Boone had packed up and left. His wicket was dark.

It was a night for lines.

Pressed against the velvet rope at Mocambo, two couples tapped their feet and waited for the maitre d' to notice them. Strains of the "Henderson Stomp" came drifting through the ornate draperies from the main room. The horns sounded good. Eventually, the two couples were led inside and then Rex returned to me.

"Good evening, Miss Chandler. Are you meeting someone?"

It was a rhetorical question; unaccompanied parties were never allowed into the better clubs, especially not Mocambo. Rex's lips curved mechanically into a smile, but his eyes had that hungry look, or maybe it was hunted.

"Not exactly," I said. "I wanted to have a word with one of your trumpet players. Henry Tooker. Do you know him?"

Rex shrugged his elegant shoulders. He was one of those mysterious Mediterranean types who had cornered the maitre d' market in town; one of that fraternity of sleek, overly polished men who all looked alike and never had last names.

"Tooker? I think not. But come, my dear, I'll escort you inside." With a practiced motion, Rex swept aside the velvet drapes and in we went.

As usual, Mocambo was jammed. Women in evening suits and silk dresses, men in tailored jackets with discreetly patterned ties, were packed like sardines at all of the small round tables. Behind them, waiters in white jackets and cigarette girls in black net stockings cheerfully pushed through, while out on the dance floor, a few couples were already putting on their moves.

As we edged toward the bandstand, I could see right away that Henry Tooker was not there. I tapped Rex on the shoulder. "Is Charlie here? I would like to speak with him."

Rex nodded and we cakewalked over to a side door. He knocked and we entered a cluttered, wood-paneled office. Sitting behind a heavy oak desk spilling over with papers was Charlie Morrison, Mocambo's owner. He was wearing a tuxedo and screaming into the phone. He smiled at me and pointed to a chair while informing someone named Gino that he was not happy about the shipment of beef that had come in that day.

"My friend, I have done business with you for six years because you know how to get things done," Charlie yelled. "The rest of the country may have a beef shortage, pal, but there shall not be a beef shortage here. All right? Do what you do. Ciao."

He slammed down the phone and grinned. "Paris, my dear. How nice to see you. Mom and Dad all right?"

"They're fine. They're in Palm Springs." I nodded at the door. "Business looks good, Charlie."

Charlie banged his knuckle three times on the desk. "Except for this and that I won't complain. How is our dear Miss Rice?"

Charlie was one of the few people who knew exactly what I did at the paper and who seemed to approve. But then, what I did generally brought Mocambo publicity. I told him the job was going well and then I asked him about Henry Tooker.

"Why, is there a problem?"

"Only that I don't think he's here. I wanted to speak to him. I thought maybe you would know where he was."

"Hmm." Charlie toyed with a pencil, then got abruptly to his feet. "I'll be right back."

While I waited, my eyes scanned the wall behind Charlie's desk. It was sort of a photographic hit parade of the celebrities who had graced Charlie's joint. Clark Gable and Carole Lombard. An unshaven John Wayne. Maria Montez. Chubby Etta Rice. Every picture had a smiling Charlie in it.

My eyes were hopelessly glued to Gary Cooper when Charlie returned with the expected news. Henry Tooker had not reported for work. Nor had he called in. I recited Henry's phone number. Charlie dialed, listened for a moment, then let the receiver fall back into the cradle.

We had dropped him off and had not noticed whether he had walked into Mocambo or not. Obviously he had not. Possibly, he had gotten himself to Union Station instead. And aboard the *Super Chief*, compartment 11.

Bound for where exactly—and why—I did not know.

I said good night to Charlie and crawled into the Bentley. I sat in the backseat stewing. In the end, I decided to take one more stab at the night. I was having the time of my life.

"Oh," she said. "It's you."

It was 9:35, a little late for a social call. But then, I had used up my allotted social call two days before.

"Paris Chandler," I said. "I know it's late. But may I come in?"

She was wearing the same thin white terry-cloth robe, but this time striped pajamas peeked out at the edges. The long tangled peroxided curls were still tangled. The wide brown eyes were chilly. "She's dead, did you know that?"

"I knew the last time I was here, but I couldn't tell you then. I'm sorry." I held up my press card. "This is where I really work."

Betty Fox did not budge from the doorway. "I already told you everything." The door began to close.

"Not quite," I said quickly. "You overlooked a thing or two. And I want to find out what happened to her. Don't you?"

The door seemed to hesitate. The brown eyes were thoughtful now, judging. She bit her lower lip and nodded.

"Okay, come in. But you've got to leave my name out of this."

She backed away and held the door open for me.

This time the Murphy bed was made up. Two indented pillows were propped up against the wall; a steno pad and a textbook lay open on the bed.

I pointed to the book. "How's it coming?"

"Filing and typing, okay. Shorthand not okay." She made a face. "Who do you suppose invented shorthand anyway?"

"The same person who invented automobiles. Some pervert who dreams up necessary but impossible tasks."

Betty looked at me. "I beg your pardon?"

"I can't drive."

"You're kidding me. What? I mean . . . you take the *bus*?"

"No. I have someone who drives me." I sat down in the rocking chair. "Look, I know this is rude. But I've had a terrible day. Do you have something I could drink?"

Betty burst out laughing. "Oh boy. Here I thought you were Miss La-di-da. And you can't drive. You've probably had a fight with your boyfriend. And maybe your feet even hurt. How about we open a bottle of wine? That is, I have a bottle that's already open. Will that be okay?"

I nodded gratefully. She opened a window and brought in a bottle from off the ledge. She took two glasses from a shelf, pulled the cork out of the bottle and poured us each a glass of red wine. Then she sat down on her bed.

"I met a man named Henry Tooker," I said. "Do you know him?"

"Er . . ."

"They used to come here, didn't they? He said they used a friend's apartment. Yours sounded convenient."

Betty's eyes grew clouded. "Well . . . yes, I think that's what happened." She sipped her wine.

"You think?"

Betty nodded. "Anne had a key to my apartment. You see, she didn't have a phone. Sometimes she gave people my number and I would take messages for her. But I was gone all day at school. So she had a key. That way she could use my phone or answer it." Betty put down her wineglass on the orange crate. "I rarely get calls myself."

"You just let her come in anytime and use your phone?"

"She, uh, paid me. Three dollars a week. It helped with the rent."

"But why didn't she have a phone?"

"You know. Jack." A brief smile punctuated the sentence. "You lied to me, I lied to you. Of course I knew about him. She didn't want a phone in her room because she didn't want men to call her in case Jack was there. Of course, Jack was never there, to my knowledge."

"So how did Jack reach her, by calling you?"

"She had an answering service. He left messages."

"Excuse me for sounding stupid," I broke in. "This is so convoluted. But why the other men? Were they giving her money, too?"

"I think some were, I'm not sure. But she was just that sort. Restless and reckless. Anne was not a girl who was going to sit in her room all day waiting for a man. Not any man."

"So she and Henry came here . . . why? In case Jack showed up?"

"I think she brought more than Henry here, though like I said, I can't be sure. Henry knew where she lived, but most of the others didn't. She told me she didn't want them suddenly dropping in. I think she did it because it added to her mystery. It made men crazy, the rigamarole they had to go through to see her."

"And what do you suppose she saw in Henry Tooker?"

Betty shrugged. "A sucker, I guess. A guy who would do things for her. But with that one, I always thought she was playing with fire."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"More wine? No, sit. I'll get it."

I lit a cigarette as Betty refilled our glasses, and tried to imagine living in this one room and going to secretarial school. Most people don't have options, Walter had said. But this option seemed a whole lot easier to imagine than the exhaustive charade that Anne Bardon had chosen as hers.

The bottle was now empty. Betty put it in a wastepaper basket, saying, "I guess we're not going to get drunk tonight." She sank back onto the bed. "Anyway, I don't know how to describe it. They were all crazy for her, but you got the feeling the other guys had dealt with girls like her before. Henry was green. For him it was true love. He was jealous, possessive, and always miserable. I think sometimes he sat out there in his car, spying on her, though I'm not positive. But I just had this feeling he was trouble waiting to happen."

"How much trouble? Do you think he could have killed her?" Tooker hadn't seemed like the type. But after the way he had possibly double-crossed me, sneaking onto the train—if he had—who knew what evil lurked in his heart. Even now, I thought darkly, he was undoubtedly chopping up ladies on the *Super Chief* club car.

Betty was shaking her head. "Gosh, Paris, who knows anymore? People came home from the war different. I mean in a fit of anger or something, I suppose he could have." She rubbed her finger across the pink scar on her cheek. "I always thought he was a bit unstable."

"Like how?"

"I can't give you an example or anything. He just seemed . . . unstable."

"What about Jack Seeberg?"

"I never met him. Or any of the others."

I glanced at my watch. "I really appreciate your help. Let's stay in touch, okay? And next time, I bring the wine."

Betty insisted on accompanying me to my car. She wanted to see what a car and driver looked like. "Don't get your hopes up," I warned as we walked through the courtyard. "Bret's a little—"

From out of nowhere, or actually, from out of the front seat, my chauffeur suddenly popped, racing around to open the rear door for me. Right. The last time Bret had opened the door for me with such eager attentiveness was the day he got the job.

"Whew! I was beginning to worry about you, Miss Chandler," he sighed, as Miss Chandler stood there shell-shocked.

"Hi, I'm Betty Fox," said Betty Fox. "Paris has been telling me all about you."

She extended her hand. Bret extended his. I think they did this while gazing into each other's eyes.

"Well I'm Bret," said Bret. He was gaping at her robe and pajamas. "Er, aren't you a little chilly?"

"Mm-hmm," said Betty, giggling.

Was Bret going to ask her into the car next, offer her his jacket? Show her how magnificently he could crumple to the ground in his death scene? I said, "Betty, let me give you my home number. In case you think of anything else, okay?" In case you want to *phone* this goof.

"Great," said Betty.

"Beverly 4–6805," announced Bret. "I'll get a piece of paper."

Bret dove into the front seat and reappeared with my number written on a Three Musketeers wrapper. I smiled at Betty and ducked into the car. Bret closed the door as if I might break inside.

"Well good night, Betty," he said.

"Yeah, good night," Betty said.

Bret started around the back of the car. "See you," he said.

"I look forward to it," she said.

I leaned against the leather headrest. "I don't believe it," I said.

". . . If you have to be overindulgent, making you lazy, it will affect your health."

17

I peeked over the edge of my blanket.

I had been dreaming of traveling on a train. Henry Tooker was on the train, dressed as a Pullman porter. I was sure he was trying to kill me and I kept moving from car to car, but always he was there. With an ax.

Slowly I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The clock on my night table said 7:46.

I reached for the phone and had to juggle it. "Hello?" I said.

"Miss Chandler? This is Harrison Godwin, FBI, Special Agent-in-Charge, Los Angeles."

"Uh-huh."

"I was wondering if you could drop by the office this afternoon. We want to talk to you."

"Uh-huh."

"Will two-thirty be all right?"

"Uh-huh." I hesitated. "Uh, wait a minute." I put down the receiver and reached for a piece of Kleenex. I blew my nose. I picked up the phone. "What for?" I said.

"We're located at 1340 West Sixth Street, corner of Loma, across from Central Receiving Hospital. Come to the reception area, Miss Chandler. Everything will be explained to you then."

What everything? I glanced over to the far-right corner of the bedroom, where Mrs. Keyes was lurking in the doorway. I made a shooing motion. This somehow ignited a faint stirring in my brain.

I said, "Don't you have to tell me now? I mean you can't just call people up at this hour and invite them downtown to grill them and not tell them why you've called them up. I mean . . ." My train of thought vaporized. Although I had been waking up every morning for twenty-nine years, I never seemed to get the hang of it.

"Look, could I call you back? After I have a cup of coffee or . . . something?"

"Two-thirty, Miss Chandler. Be here."

The cold marble of the bathroom floor jarred my body awake. I bathed. Several cups of coffee had my brain stirring. I sat at the kitchen table reading the *Examiner*. Only one sentence of interest. "The brutal slaying of Elizabeth Short is not believed to be related to any of the previous three murders in L.A. County this month." Then, still wrapped in my terry-cloth robe, I sat down at the phone table in the hall. I tried Walter Ainsley at home first. No answer. No answer? It was 9:05. I couldn't imagine that Walter was up and about at 9:05. Unless he was still at the paper. I called the city desk. No, Walter had left at five in the morning.

I sat there thinking. Horst had mentioned Lauralee Hart and a Yvette. If Jack Seeberg and Anne and Lauralee all worked for MGM, it seemed likely that Yvette did, too. I made another call.

"Publicity."

"Kate? It's Paris Chandler."

"Hi, Paris . . . what's cooking?"

"I'm trying to find out if you have a young actress under contract named Yvette something. I can't tell you what she's been in."

"Neither can anyone else. Yvette Sands, unquestionably young, questionably an actress. Hang on."

Kate Levine was one of the stable of publicists at MGM whom I dealt with on behalf of Etta Rice. She was a cheerful girl with glasses who seemed to take her job with a grain of salt, quite rare in a business where most movie-connected people considered their work as ordained by God. Over the last year, we had helped each other out: I leaked items for her, she looked into gossip for me.

"Anyway, she's doing a movie called *Saloon Sally*," said Kate a moment later. "She doesn't play Sally, that's all I know."

A white rag appeared on the phone table. Mrs. Keyes arrived with it, gripping a jar of furniture polish. She began rubbing the table. "Who's the director?" I said.

"Someone named Ian Boldt. A Brit. He's new."

"Can you arrange for me to see her? Soon?"

"You want to see Yvette Sands? Whatever for?"

I laughed. "Possible piece of gossip. Today, do you think?"

"Mm," said Kate. "Let's see. They've been on Lot three, but I think they may be shooting on Sound Stage twenty-nine today. A musical number, I guess. Ian usually likes to break for lunch around noon. Why don't you meet me at the commissary then? I'll bring Yvette over."

Mrs. Keyes had now lifted the phone and was polishing under it. Obviously she was concerned I was talking to the FBI again and she might miss the best parts.

"I really appreciate this," I said.

"I need to pitch you some stuff anyway," Kate said.

By 12:45, the commissary was beginning to fill up. The earliest arrivals were huddled at the writers' table where, already, a dozen men sat trading their best lines of the morning. Another group had collected around the directors' table, but Jack Seeberg, whom I was hoping to spot, was not there.

"It's not as bad as it looks, you know. Well maybe it is. But you get used to it after a while. Want some?"

A jar of mustard floated over the table toward me. It hovered just above my water glass. A lot of the mustard that had been in the jar was now on her plate, suffocating what had been two perfectly fine hard-boiled eggs.

"I read in a magazine that what you eat affects your moods? Well my acting coach said that by the time I'm thirty I'll be hard-boiled and curdled." Yvette Sands giggled. "I eat cottage cheese for dinner."

"Are you a vegetarian?" I inquired politely.

"No," said Yvette, "I'm a Gemini."

I waved away the mustard. Kate, a publicist who knew her place, had introduced me to the actress then left. She would return in forty-five minutes, she said. This left me sitting with a strawberry blonde in cowboy clothes at one of the small tables along the fringes of the room reserved for minor players. Tan shirt with silver snap buttons, ankle-length suede skirt, boots, and a brown felt cowboy hat that she kept perched, at an angle, on her head. That's what she wore. What you noticed were the pale blue eyes, the porcelain skin, and, from what I could tell, a body that could win any contest it entered. Somewhere here at MGM, on a back lot or in the basement, they had to be factory-producing these girls, the way Ford did its cars. Only faster.

"I understand you were a friend of Anne Bardon's," I said, raising my melted cheese sandwich. "She mentioned you to me."

Yvette's hand fluttered up to her throat. "Anne did? But Anne's . . ." Panic swept across her eyes.

"Dead. I know."

A boy in a white jacket placed an iced tea in front of Yvette and a Coke in front of me.

"We were working on a story together. Did she tell you? It was about struggling young actresses. But now, because of what happened, I just want the story to be about her." I touched Yvette's arm. "Are you all right?"

All of the delicate pink color had drained from her porcelain cheeks. Her hand plummeted from her throat to her iced tea. She raised the glass to her lips and sipped. Then she took a deep breath.

"It's very hard for me to deal with death in the middle of a movie," she said offhandedly.

"Forgive me. Please go ahead and eat. I'm just going to take out my notebook, jot some things down. Let's see. Yvette. Y-V-E-T-T-E. Sands. Age . . . ?"

"I'm twenty-two. But—"

"Please start, Yvette. And you've known Anne how long?"

"A year. Two years, I don't know."

"But you knew her well?"

Yvette smiled thinly. "We all know each other *very* well, Miss . . ."

"Call me Paris. Who's we? Oh, I see. Jack's girls, you mean."

Yvette bit her bottom lip, then turned that move into a little smile. She said nothing.

"I suppose there are quite a few of you. The girls who know Jack."

Yvette picked up her fork and began pulverizing her eggs. She did not look up as she replied, "Not that many. There's me and a girl named Lauralee. And Kiki, who's my roommate, only she's been shooting in New York. There was another girl named Carole, but I don't know what happened to her. And of course . . ."

Suddenly, she closed her eyes and opened her mouth, as if she might be struggling for air. "Anne," she finally breathed.

I produced a small smile of sympathy. I said, "You all must have been devastated by the news. Please eat, Yvette. Your eggs are getting . . . And Jack, poor Jack. How did he take it?"

"Terrible. He gave us the week off."

"Ah."

"He said we should be solemn."

Solemn. I ate some more of my sandwich. I couldn't wait to write that line. "Has anyone been in touch with the police?"

Yvette shook her head. "Jack told us not to discuss this with anybody. Besides, what could we tell the police? Some crackpot just . . ." A perfect tear rolled down her cheek. I watched its progress, to the corner of her mouth, and down her chin to . . . *plink!* Right into the eggs. Someone, I decided, ought to stick this girl in a remake of *Camille*.

She looked up, blinking soulfully. "Why are you asking me these things?"

"Because I'm trying to create a picture of Anne's life in Hollywood. And if it weren't for Jack, as I understand it," I said, lying through my teeth, "you girls would not be able to get by. He gets you work, right? And he helps support you. He's like your, well, you know, fairy godfather." I smiled sweetly.

Yvette giggled. "That's cute. Fairy godfather." She began toying with her eggs again.

"So how do you girls know each other?"

"Well, we do . . . things together, like."

"Uh-huh."

"We shop, or have lunch, or whatever."

"And did you shop with Anne?"

"Sometimes." A bit of egg finally made it into her mouth. She put down her fork.

"Where did you and Anne shop?"

"All kinds of places. Haggerty's, little places on Wilshire. Magnin's, you know. Saks sometimes."

"And did he give you money, or did you have the bills sent to him? I'm curious. Anne never seemed to have any money."

"Jack would give it to us. He'd say, 'Here, Yvette. Go buy yourself something,' and then he'd say what. A dress or a pair of stockings, like that. But Anne didn't get money. She'd just charge things." Yvette smiled. "She learned to sign her name like Mrs. Seeberg."

"Is that so."

"Yeah. Once—" Suddenly, a small delicate hand clapped itself over Yvette's mouth. "I'd better not."

I put down my pen and reached for the Coke. "Yes, probably not." I sipped it. "On the other hand, I don't suppose there's any harm, if you feel you want to tell me."

"Well." Yvette grinned wickedly. "We were in David Orgell's, the jewelry store? Just the two of us, no one else." She narrowed her eyes. "You're sure you won't tell?"

"Not ever," I swore.

"Well, she had picked out this little brooch. I think it was her birthday. It was so darling, it was a gold cat with ruby eyes. And they were wrapping it up for her when Mrs. Seeberg walked in. And Anne, what a card, just picked up the box and said, 'Charge it to Jack Seeberg, please.' And walked out. I almost died."

"What did Mrs. Seeberg do?"

"I don't know. I was laughing so hard, tears were rolling down my face." Yvette smiled.

"So Anne was kind of his special girl, huh?"

The smile faded. The fork began mashing the eggs again. "Maybe she was, but they were always fighting. It was one of those love-hate things, I guess. She couldn't own him the way, you know, she could own other men. And he couldn't tame her. I think he got pretty fed up with her sometimes."

"Over what exactly?"

"Different things."

I took another bite of my sandwich. Yvette adjusted her cowboy hat. I said, "Was there something in particular they quarreled about. Can you remember any one thing?"

Yvette raised a finger to her lips. I supposed that meant she was thinking.

"He didn't like her seeing other men, was one thing. So he would punish her."

"Punish her?"

"Well, like the time he gave the role to Lauralee instead of her. Boy, did that make Anne mad. It was a role she really wanted. But I don't remember the picture."

"What did Anne do?" I asked, fascinated.

"Threatened never to see him again. But after a while she did."

"Still," I said, "she hasn't made a movie in quite some time. Do you know why?"

"See after that fight, Anne tried to get work at other studios. On a loan-out? But Jack kept stopping her. He'd put the word out and no one would take her. Then they made up. And Anne said he was going to do a movie soon that would have a major role in it for her. Almost like a lead."

"Do you know what the movie was?"

"I don't know the name. But it was with Margaret O'Brien and Cyd Charisse. And Anne would have had the third female lead."

That would have been a big deal for any actress, though who knew if Seeberg had meant it. Obviously, he was a master at stringing these girls along. He controlled their careers totally. And their finances, too. A real hunk of heaven. Which reminded me. "Does the name Henry Tooker ring a bell?" I asked.

Again the finger rose to the lips. This girl must have been a killer at charades. "Uh-uh, never heard of him."

The waiter in the white jacket returned and took our plates away, mine clean, hers an egg and mustard mess. I lit a cigarette and leaned back in the chair. At a table nearby, two men in business suits sat with three cowpokes; probably two producers hanging out with film stars, though their faces meant nothing to me. Yvette was adjusting her cowboy hat.

"So you really think Anne was killed by someone she didn't know? Did she ever tell you she was frightened?"

The panic flashed back into her eyes. "I told you," she said angrily. "I can't talk about it."

"She said she thought she was being followed. She told me that the day she was killed. Did she ever mention it to you?"

Yvette stared at me. "Followed? By who?"

"She said maybe it was a detective Jack had hired to watch her."

"That's silly. Jack would never do something like that."

"You said they often quarreled, Yvette. Could he have, you know, in a fit of anger . . ."

I could see Kate coming into the dining room, stopping at a table to speak with the director Jules Dassin. Yvette saw her, also. She smiled, too brightly. "It was nice meeting you, uh . . . Look, stop by the set sometime. I really have to run."

She stood up and began making her way among the tables, a shapely girl in a cowgirl skirt, reaching up, adjusting, again, her hat. A girl not too bright. But a girl who seemed terrified by Anne Bardon's death.

"Sorry," said Kate. "I got tied up on the phone. How did the interview go?"

Kate was wearing a tan skirt and white short-sleeved blouse, white socks and loafers. She sat down in the chair vacated by Yvette and signaled a waiter. "Coffee, please. Paris? Good, make that two."

I turned again at the director's table. Still no Seeberg. It occurred to me that I didn't know if he was working on a picture. The coffee arrived. Kate dropped two cubes of sugar in hers. I reached for the pitcher of cream. "She seemed a little upset. A friend of hers was murdered."

Kate glanced up. "A friend of Yvette's?"

"Anne Bardon. Did you know her?"

"Not really." She reached for a spoon and began stirring her coffee. "There are so many of them, these girls. In fact, when I read the news in the paper her name didn't ring a bell. Then a couple of reporters phoned so I dug up what we had on her." She put her spoon down. "It wasn't much."

"Could you look up something for me? A picture made in the last year or two with an actress named Lauralee Hart. Probably a small role. Jack Seeberg was the director."

"Funny you should mention Jack," said Kate. "I was going to tell you about his next picture."

"The one with Cyd Charisse and Maggie O'Brien?"

"It's called *Unfinished Dance*. It's a remake of *La Mort du Cygne*."

"Has it been fully cast?"

"No, Jack's still working on it. Why?"

"I'm curious. Yvette told me that Anne might have gotten a role."

"Are you writing something about Anne?"

"Possibly. I don't know."

Kate looked at me thoughtfully. "Between you and me, Paris, this is not an item for Etta."

"It wouldn't be an item for Etta."

"Then you're really playing in the wrong ball park, kiddo."

"Why?"

"All I know is the word came down. The word is mum. Sorry, but I've got to run." She was on her feet.

"Came down from where?"

"Wherever words come down from."

I watched Kate walk away. At MGM, words came down from Louis B. Mayer. I sipped my coffee and thought about Kate Levine. A Hollywood girl after all. She was my friend, of course.

Until I really needed her.

The offices occupied by the FBI on West Sixth Street looked like a front for something shifty and possibly mob-related. Either J. Edgar Hoover had a thing for shady office decor, or the FBI chief had been spending too much time around crooks. Or maybe the L.A. office simply did not figure highly in J. Edgar's plans.

I sat in a straight-backed wooden chair, one of a row along a yellowish wall on which curls of paint were trying to crawl off. This put me in position to stare straight ahead at the wood-paneled wall opposite, upon which hung an enormous portrait of Hoover. He was flanked by a considerably smaller picture of Truman to the left and by the imposing seal of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the right. Under the seal was a wooden desk, currently occupied by a man in a shiny blue suit. Below his pomaded dark hair was a thin face built around a sharp nose and a quivering upper lip. After telling me to "siddown," he picked up a phone, dialed three numbers and intoned, "She's here."

Ten minutes later I was still "here." To my left was a tall narrow window, dirty, partially covered by an even dirtier venetian blind. A potted palm listed in front of it. The smell of stale cigarette smoke was nauseating.

I stood up. "I'd like to use the telephone," I said.

"Siddown."

"There's a phone on the corner, I'll be right back."

"Mr. Godwin's tied up. He'll be untied in a moment. So hold your horses, sister, and siddown."

His upper lip quivered, showing a gap between his two front teeth. I did not trust people with gaps between their front teeth. They always looked like they were leering. "My horses are outside," I said and walked out through the pebbled-glass door.

Down on the street, I hurried to the corner and dropped a nickel in the coin box. Walter was not home. I tried the paper and was told to hang on. Presently Walter said, "Yeah, Ainsley here."

"I'm at the corner of Sixth and Union in a phone booth, Walter. The FBI is upstairs waiting to talk to me. I . . . where have you been?"

I was facing Union with my back to the FBI building. I edged around so that I could keep an eye on the front door in case the gap-toothed man came out to fetch me. The telephone cord began to strangle me.

"I been around. Whadda they want, the FBI?"

There was a slight slurring in his speech. The dope had probably been out drinking all morning.

"They wouldn't tell me. But I assume it has to do with Anne Bardon. Or something." The front door swung open. "Lookit, Walter . . ."

I tried to think quickly. The gap-toothed man would be pounding on the phone booth in a split second. "What I need to know . . ."

I sucked in my breath.

"Can't hear you, what?" Walter said.

She had paused just outside the door, fumbling inside a large leather shoulder bag. She was wearing a cream-colored wool skirt and matching silk blouse, buttoned at the collar, with a black satin ribbon tied in a bow at the throat. Her long red hair ruffled in the breeze.

She found her sunglasses and slipped them on. Then, without once looking in my direction, she made a sharp left and began walking away from me. The click click click of her high heels on the smooth white sidewalk echoed back at me.

"If you're dealing with Godwin, don't tell him nothing, Paris. Just find out what he's after. Then what you do . . ."

Near the end of the block, near Loma, she stepped out onto the street and unlocked the door of a low-slung black coupe. Bret was parked around my corner on Union. The coupe's engine turned over.

". . . the bathroom's down the hall. They won't follow you in there," Walter was saying.

I said, "What?"

"There's a service staircase just around the corner."

"I'll call you back," I said and hung up.

I stayed in the phone booth until Tee had driven by, heading west on Sixth. A moment later I was in the backseat of the Bentley telling Bret to swing the car around "on the double."

It took five blocks to catch her across from MacArthur Park. Three cars filled in the gap.

"This is not exactly the most inconspicuous car, you know," said Bret, his shoulders hunched forward. "Where we going anyway?"

"How would I know? If I knew I could just get there some other way. I could take the bus."

I sat back grumpily. What was Tee doing at the FBI? She was everywhere. I didn't like her being everywhere. I didn't like her being with Nick.

"I think she's with the mob," I said. "Or Senator McCarthy. Watch the light, okay?"

At Western, the black coupe made a very fast right. This girl could move. Staying three or four cars behind, we followed her north to Sunset. She turned left. At Argyle she turned right. Two blocks later she made another left onto Hollywood Boulevard. At the 6200 block, she pulled over to the curb and parked. A light held us up half a block away. She got out of the car and entered a building two doors down from the Pantages Theater.

Still the light was still red. I jumped out, slamming the door.

The entrance that Theodora Jones had breezed through belonged to a five-story white building with a marble floor in the lobby. There was no sign of Tee. The elevators were at the rear of the lobby. One was in use. A sleepy-eyed man modeling a blue uniform with black braid leaned against the wall beside the second elevator, reading *The Racing Form.*

"Excuse me. A tall redhead came through here just now . . ."

He raised his heavy lids at me.

"Do you know where she went?"

With a sigh of utter abusement, he folded the paper in half and stepped into the elevator. I followed him. He closed the door and started up. He tapped his foot on the floor as the numbers on the brass panel lit up; two, three . . . at four, he slammed on the brakes. "That way," he muttered, nodding toward the right.

It was a long hall broken up by polished oak doors. For Hollywood Boulevard, this was class. I passed an optometrist's office, an export company, two lawyers, an insurance firm, and an investigations outfit before I hit the end of the hallway and a door that read "Hollywood Costumes, Inc."

No sounds filtered out from any of the offices.

I walked back toward the elevator, stopping at each doorway, listening more closely. Then I retraced my steps once more. Just as I reached Hollywood Costumes, I noticed that the door to Barney Feldman Investigations was slightly ajar. I knocked. No one told me to come in. I went in.

I was standing in a small waiting room. Against the wall opposite stretched a worn green-velvet couch that looked like something Lana Turner had once lounged on in a movie. There was also a coffee table, a couple of stiff wooden chairs, and a coat rack. At the back of the room, to the left of the couch, was a door. It was closed.

"Hello," I called.

"Come in," a female voice called back.

I walked to the door and twisted the knob.

Theodora Jones was standing before a dented file cabinet, shoving a folder into the top drawer. She turned.

"Why . . . Paris Chandler. If this isn't a surprise. What brings you here?"

In front of her stood a wooden desk that looked secondhand. A folder with several typewritten pages lay open on it. Beside the desk, a typewriter occupied a stand. A sheet of blank paper flopped over the top of the typewriter. She was looking at me expectantly, with those wide reddish-brown eyes.

"A double surprise, Tee. I had no idea you worked for an investigator. How . . . interesting."

"At times. Here, sit down."

She pointed to a club chair on my side of the desk. Behind her, a large window peeked out from a sweeping drape done in the same green velvet as the couch. The desk held a green leather blotter, a matching pencil holder, and a telephone. Tee sat down behind the desk. "Didn't Nick tell you? Well maybe not. How did you find me?"

I also sat down. A vase spilling over with red roses and white wisteria dominated the left edge of her desk. Scattered about the wooden floor were potted plants. The room had the fresh, slightly scented perfume of a florist shop.

"I followed you."

I opened my purse and found a cigarette. "From the FBI. I was waiting to go in and I was on the corner making a call when you came out." I smiled. "Isn't that a coincidence?"

Tee slid a glass ashtray across the desk toward me.

"I mean, I assume you were talking to the FBI."

"That's right," drawled Tee.

"But why?" I reached for the cheap brass lighter on the desk.

Tee stood up and went around behind her chair to open the window. A cool breeze fluttered into the room. "Elizabeth Short. Just routine."

She sat on the windowsill and folded her arms. Her eyes looked amused.

I flicked the lighter. A blue flame sprang up immediately. "You mean you knew her?"

"A little, yes."

"Working for Barney Feldman."

"Uh, no. Before that."

"But how would the FBI have known?"

She smiled. "Let's just say I was an obvious choice." The phone rang. Tee moved back to the desk and answered it. "Feldman Investigations."

Sitting down, she reached for a sheet of paper and began scribbling as she listened. Then she looked at her watch. "I can meet you in twenty minutes. I'll come there. Yes. Uh-huh. I'm on my way."

She dropped the receiver back onto the cradle. The amusement had gone out of her eyes. She stood up. "Listen, Paris. This is what you do. Go back there and act real nice. Like you would do anything on earth to help those wonderful G-men. Don't be cute, Harrison won't like that. Try to find some tidbit to give them and they'll let you go. I gotta run."

She reached for a camel-hair jacket that was draped across the back of her chair. The chair belonging to the only desk at Barney Feldman Investigations.

She walked over to a small round mirror that hung on the wall and began smoothing her hair. I said, "I have no tidbits, Tee. I never even heard of Elizabeth Short until yesterday."

She ran a lipstick around her mouth. "They think you know something about Anne Bardon's death. They're looking for a link."

"How do you know that?" I didn't like this.

Tee turned from the mirror, rubbing her lips together. "They asked me to find out what you know."

I put the cigarette into the ashtray and watched the bluish smoke dance in the breeze coming through the open window. I felt a chill. My voice came out in a whisper. "How would they know we've met?"

Tee was stuffing things in her purse. She opened the top drawer to the desk, coolly removed a nickel-plated handgun and dropped it into her bag. "It's just a small town, Paris. Everybody knows everything. You've got to be aware of that, you of all people." She glanced at me. "Coming?"

I didn't move. The phone rang. Tee stared at it but didn't pick it up.

I said, "Maybe it's Barney Feldman."

"It isn't." The ringing stopped. "We didn't get along. I bought him out."

"You mean you . . ."

"Are not office help?" she said sweetly.

I gave her a bland look. "You don't exactly fade into the woodwork, Tee, is all I was thinking."

She watched me, her face expressionless. "Stand up," she said calmly, "and turn around. Face the door. Don't move, just stay there."

I stood up and turned around. I was being put on, but I didn't know how. Maybe Barney Feldman ran the branch office in Tarzana.

"Okay," said Tee. "You can look."

Slowly I turned back. The red hair had disappeared under a gray fedora. A pair of metal-rimmed glasses rested on the bridge of her nose. She wore a man's black jacket and a tie hung around her neck.

"If you can overlook the lipstick," she said, her voice deep and husky now. She dropped the hat on the desk, pulled off the tie and quickly changed jackets. "Honey, we're both going to be late."

She took my arm and hurried me out of the office, stopping to lock the entrance door. The elevator arrived with the same guy and his *Racing Form*. We stepped in. Tee said, "So why were you following me anyway?"

I watched the blinking numbers on the panel. The doors opened onto the lobby. I walked out.

"I thought you were someone else," I said.

18

It was quarter to four when I waltzed through the doors to the FBI offices. An hour and fifteen minutes late, ah well. The gap-toothed shark glanced up at me and pointed to one of the chairs.

"Right," I said.

This time I had company. Two rough-looking characters also occupied chairs. Both wore heavy blue overalls, white T-shirts, and tattoos on their arms. They fit the decor. There was also a frightened young woman with mousy blond hair who kept nibbling on her thumb. There was nothing to read.

Eventually a young man in a dark suit came through a door to the right of the gate watcher's desk and summoned the two workmen. I wondered how long the government would make me wait. I did not think it a vindicative government. Still, I should never have taken off after Tee Jones. Discovering that she was a gun-toting private dick (Jane?) did not cheer me up at all. Discovering that she was supposed to snoop around me made me furious. Maybe I would blow her cover, run an Item in the column. I.e, "That redhead parading around town as a man is private investigator Theodora Jones. . . ."

"Miss Chandler?"

The young man in the dark suit was looking at me from the doorway into which he had rematerialized. "Please follow me."

I took a deep breath, stood, and followed him. He closed the door behind me. We were standing in a bright hallway, painted industrial green and lit by fluorescent tubes that ran along the ceiling. At the end of the hall was a large corner office. I entered behind him.

An imposing desk stood at an angle between the corner windows. It was bracketed by the American flag on the left and the flag of California on the right; how jake. The man behind the desk, who was now getting to his feet, was brown-haired and barrel-chested. The corners of his mouth looked stuck in the down position.

"Miss Chandler? Harrison Godwin. I think you know this gentleman. Please have a seat."

"This gentleman" was Sgt. Billy Beame, who occupied one of the two visitor chairs across the desk from Godwin. I nodded at Beame and sat down. My temples began to throb.

Godwin lifted a soggy cigar out of an ashtray and took his time relighting it. He had a square pasty-colored face; a dull setting for a pair of aquamarine eyes. A plume of smoke rose up between them. "Sergeant Beame tells me you've been a busy girl."

I started to say that Theodora Jones had told *me* that he had been a busy boy, but decided against this approach.

Instead I said, "Uh, do you have an aspirin. By any chance? I'm not feeling well."

Godwin glanced at Beame then back at me. He pushed a button on his intercom. "Miss Riley, please bring me a glass of water and two aspirin, thank you." I hadn't seen a woman anywhere and wondered where he had her stashed. But in she entered momentarily, a schoolmarmish woman with gray hair pulled back in a severe knot. Without asking anyone, she automatically placed the water and the aspirin on the desk in front of me. I decided she was anti-female.

"Thank you." I swallowed the aspirin. "My housekeeper tried to keep me in bed. But I told her it was very important that I come down here. I hope I can help you." I smiled a brave smile.

Godwin cleared his throat. "We won't keep you long, Miss Chandler. As you are aware there is a history of cooperation between reporters at your paper and federal and local authorities."

"Uh, sure," I said.

"In pursuit of justice," he said.

"Mm-hm," I said.

"For instance, you undoubtedly saw the headline in your paper this morning." He reached for the paper, conveniently lying on the desk, and held it up. The lead headline said, HOOVER LAUDS *EXAMINER* FOR TRANSMITTING TO THE FBI FINGERPRINTS OF MURDER VICTIM. I nodded. What was he getting at?

"I'm sure you want to continue this tradition," is what Harrison Godwin said.

"Of course," I said.

Beame coughed.

Godwin said, "Good." He puffed on his cigar. I folded my hands together. They were clammy.

"Then perhaps you will tell us anything you have learned about the Anne Bardon death that might help us locate the perpetrator of the heinous murder of Elizabeth Short."

"What?"

"Sergeant Beame and his men believe you may have some information. . . ."

I tried to think. The aspirin were not helping my headache at all. I said, "Mr. Godwin, I wouldn't presume to be more knowledgeable about a murder than Sergeant Beame. My involvement is slight. I was attempting to write a story that included Miss Bardon. Naturally her death greatly upset me. I thought I could write the story anyway, by talking to some people who knew her. But as far as solving her murder . . . well, you see. I'm just a society reporter. A legman actually." I smiled lamely.

A cloud of smoke issued forth, obliterating Godwin. "I've got all night, Miss Chandler."

Beame said, "See what I mean?"

I didn't want to sit there all night. Give them something, Tee had said.

I leaned forward. "One person you may want to talk to, Mr. Godwin, and I don't know much about him. But there's a fellow named Henry Tooker."

"Tooker?" Godwin placed his cigar in the ashtray.

"He played trumpet at Mocambo. Until last night. Anne said he was a friend. I looked him up. Last night I met with him. He claimed he and Anne were to be married. In Iowa. On the nineteenth. She was supposed to take the train there the night after she was murdered. He was to follow."

"Hold it." Godwin reached for a ballpoint pen and made a couple of notes. I was impressed. Ballpoint pens were hard to find. He looked up. "When?"

"When what?"

"When was he to follow?"

"I think last night, he said. Anyway, here's the funny part. We were driving around and—"

"Driving around? Where?"

"West Hollywood. I was trying to hang on to him as long as I could. To find out all I could, I mean."

"She has a chauffeur," Beame put in sourly.

"And Henry kept reminding me he had to be at work by seven o'clock."

"At Mocambo you mean."

"Yes, exactly. Anyway, we dropped him off a few minutes after."

"So?"

"So later it occurred to me I had forgotten to ask him something. And I went back there, thinking I could ask him during a break."

"Uh-huh," said Godwin.

"Well he wasn't there."

"What do you mean he wasn't there?"

"I mean he wasn't there." Was I not speaking a known language?

"So maybe he went home. What's the point?"

"I'm not sure," I conceded. "I mean, maybe he did go home. Only he never showed up at Mocambo. We dropped him off right in front. But Charlie Morrison said he had never reported for work. And his phone didn't answer. Isn't that odd, don't you think?"

Godwin was scratching the side of his nose with the top of his pen. "I don't understand what the connection is here. Are you saying this Tooker knew Elizabeth Short?"

No wonder Al Capone got away with anything he wanted to. These guys were idiots. I said, "I know nothing about Elizabeth Short. And I don't know much about Anne Bardon either. I was just trying to show a little initiative at the paper."

"We'd like to see some of your initiative."

I stared at Godwin. "Excuse me?"

"Your notebooks, Miss Chandler. We'd like to see who you've talked to and what they said."

"That's right," said Beame.

"Wait a minute. You don't trust me?"

"May I remind you, Miss Chandler, that withholding information from the federal government is a serious offense."

"Er . . ."

"So if you don't mind, Sergeant Beame here will follow you home, or to your office, and collect those notebooks." Godwin was looking at me hard.

"But that's not possible. I mean, it's possible that he could follow me. But he can't have any notebooks. Actually, he could have them, that is, I would be happy to let him have them of course, if there were any notebooks. But there aren't. I have no notebooks."

I began to cough.

"Are you all right, Miss Chandler? Now look. Cut the monkey business. We have dead women scattered all over the city and—"

"I have no notebooks." Was this guy deaf? "I'm telling you Mr. Godwin, I do not take notes during interviews. Sometimes I write down names if the spelling is tricky. I tried taking notes in the beginning. Because that's what reporters seemed to do. But then I couldn't ever read my handwriting. And I was so busy trying to write everything down, I didn't really listen.

Do you know what I mean? Or maybe you don't have that problem. My teachers always complained to my parents about my penmanship."

"Jesus," said Beame.

"Miss Chandler," said Godwin. "This is not funny."

"Sorry." I drank the rest of the water.

"You're facing prosecution. You could go to jail."

"For what?" I asked. "Bad penmanship?"

Godwin was on his feet. "Lock her up!" he shrieked at Beame. Beame was on his feet, grinning.

"Look," I said earnestly. "All I'm trying to tell you is that I have no notebooks. I have a photographic memory and pretty good recall. I remember conversations word-perfect. I remember phone numbers and addresses. I remember long passages from books. Believe me, it's annoying to me, too. For instance, when I was nine, I memorized *Winnie-the-Pooh*. "Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and—"

"Miss Chandler, enough!"

Godwin was looking at Beame. Beame shrugged. In unison their eyes swiveled toward me. I sat there smiling a charming, but somewhat batty smile while they figured out what to do with me next.

The intercom buzzed. The Miss Riley person crackled, "Sir, Police Chief Horrall is here."

Godwin put his cigar down. "All right, Miss Chandler. You can go. For now. But be forewarned."

Forewarned?

"We may bring you back to debrief you."

"To what?" I said.

Godwin gave me a chilly smile. "To remove the notes from your photographic memory, Miss Chandler. Good day."

I stood up. "I can go now? Well, thanks. I, er, look, I'm terribly sorry. Really."

"About what?" said Godwin.

"My loops. If only I had practiced them more."

19

I dropped a nickel in the box on the corner and called the paper.

"So how come you hung up on me?" Walter said.

"Long story. Short story—I think Henry Tooker skipped town."

"The guy with the dame?"

"As you put it. Right." Quickly I recounted what I had pulled out of Tooker, and the follow-up. Fed another nickel into the phone and heard Walter tell me to hang on. I hung on.

"Dickinson's in conference," he said a moment later. "Give it to me again. I'm gonna try to get this in the paper."

I told Walter I hadn't exactly cornered the market on nickels and to call me back. As I went through the story again, I could hear him banging on his typewriter.

"All right, Paris. I'll check with you later. You'll be home?"

I said I would be and went.

Once in the study, I opened a drawer in the desk and pulled out my notebooks. There was one nearly used-up notebook, and a second with only three pages filled. What I had told the FBI was true and false. I did not, in fact, record my conversations as they were happening, nor did I often take any notes at all. I recorded the conversations later, from memory. The first notebook contained, verbatim, everything Anne Bardon had told me. In it also was my conversation with Henry Tooker, which I had written out late last night, and earlier conversations with Lauralee Hart and Betty Fox. The stuff from the man at the train station was in there, too.

The second notebook recalled my talks with Sergeant Beame so that I could remember what I had, and had not, told him. Now, as I sat there with Jo Stafford on the record player and a cup of hot lemon tea, I swiftly jotted down memories of my FBI afternoon.

As I wrote, or more precisely, as I printed in large block letters, I wondered how badly I had lied. I mean, I said there were no notebooks, but obviously there were. Still, because what was in them had been written after the fact, maybe they contained hearsay. I put down my pencil and thought about that. I decided it was not hearsay. I decided that I was a bald-faced liar.

I switched on the brass lamp. The morning papers were stacked on the ottoman, still unread. I went over and turned off the phonograph and sat down in the red leather chair. I started with the *Examiner*. None of the murder stories carried bylines since so many staffers had contributed. But I could detect Walter's writing; Walter at the copy desk taking reporter's phone calls, skillfully weaving the facts in his clear and colorful style.

Elizabeth Short had been tortured for two days, the lead story said. Police were searching the area where she was found for articles of clothing. A woman in an apartment house nearby swore she saw a werewolf roaming the neighborhood. Eight people had already confessed to the murder. Police were dragging in and interrogating all known perverts. Chief Jack Horrall vowed the culprit would be nabbed "no matter what it takes."

I read the rest of it, all of it, then tried to think. Elizabeth Short and Anne Bardon; was there a connection? None of the stories indicated that Short had been an actress, but her mother noted that Elizabeth had come to California with that in mind. Could Anne and Elizabeth have known each other? Might their paths have crossed? I remembered Bob Pierce on the phone to Mrs. Short telling her that her daughter had won a beauty contest. The newspapers confirmed that she was attractive. Could she have known Jack Seeberg? And. . . .

I began turning the pages in my notebook. There it was; Elizabeth. Henry Tooker saying he had met Anne Bardon through an Elizabeth at Mocambo.

I felt a chill. A man following Anne; a man who saw me go into her house. Following *me* home. Leaving a note, in *my* mailbox. I turned and glanced out the leaded windows. But night had fallen and the windows were dark, revealing only the reflection of the brass desk lamp.

The phone rang. I jumped.

I hurried into the hall and answered it.

"It's Ainsley," said Walter. "Your story's in."

"Will you read it to me?"

"I'll bring it to you. How about joining me for a cocktail? I've got one more story to knock out first."

"Musso's?"

"Naw. Too crowded. We'll go somewhere nice."

"Really?" I was skeptical.

"What, you think I don't have class? I got class. We'll go to the Ambassador. I might even buy you dinner."

"Why Walter," I said, surprised. "What time?"

"Seven-thirty. In the bar off the lobby. You can get there, can't you?"

"Sure."

"See you, kid."

I felt kind of pleased as I stared into my closet, trying to figure out what to put on. I decided to look mysterious. I chose a black crepe dress with padded shoulders and a jewel neck, found a pair of seamed silk stockings, dug a black garter belt out of a drawer, and tussled off the top shelf of my closet a Hattie Carnegie black cloche with a veil. I was sitting at my vanity table in the bathroom applying dark red lipstick when, again, the phone rang.

"It's me," said Nick. "What are you doing?"

"Actually," I said, untangling the cord as I stood over my bed, "I'm getting ready to go out."

"Anyone I know?"

"Walter Ainsley." Immediately I knew I had made a mistake.

"It's okay," said Nick, "if you don't want to tell me."

"I'm telling you."

"Ainsley? I didn't know you were that desperate."

"Walter used to be a great crime reporter," I remarked coolly. "Which isn't as good as a private eye, but the best I could do on short notice."

"Am I missing something here?" said Nick irritably.

"I ran into your friend Tee Jones this afternoon, that's all. You never told me she had such an interesting job. Imagine; she carries a gun."

"Where did you run into her and her gun?"

"Oh at the FBI. It's where all the girls hang out these days."

"Look, it's nearly seven. Dump Ainsley and come with me. We've got to talk."

"I can't do that."

"Etta's sending me to a party Dory Schary is having. That's why I thought of you. It occurred to me your friend

Seeberg might turn up." There was a pause. "Anyway, Ainsley's a palooka."

"He didn't look like a palooka in the paper today. He was rewrite on all the murder stuff. You're jealous."

"Whatever you say. Do you have Schary's address? I'll meet you there."

I told Nick I wasn't going to meet him there.

"I don't get it," he complained. "Are you mad at me?"

"Of course I'm not mad at you. But I'm not throwing Walter over. If Seeberg's there, find out who he's with. Okay, Nick?"

"He's a drunk, Paris."

"I know," I said quietly. "See you." And I hung up.

Bret dropped me in front of the Ambassador Hotel at twenty minutes to eight. As the doorman ushered me inside I wondered if Walter had thought to make a reservation at the Cocoanut Grove, which is what I assumed he meant by dinner. Even on a week night, the Grove was booked solid, and as I headed into the bar, I noticed a number of elegantly dressed couples moving across the lobby toward the nightclub entrance.

Walter was not in the bar, at the bar, or at a table.

"Yes, miss," said the maitre d'.

"I'm supposed to meet a gentleman, a Mr. Ainsley?"

"Ah yes." The matire d' gave me an oily smile. "Mr. Ainsley said to seat you. He'll be right back. Come this way, please."

The bar was spilling over with people chattering at each other through a haze of blue smoke. I picked my way around the tables to the far end of the room and to the only still-vacant table. If somebody were following me, I was sitting game here. The maitre d' helped me off with my black Persian lamb jacket. I sat down, nervously lit a cigarette and waited.

Fifteen minutes later, with relief, I spotted Walter in the doorway.

He was wearing a brown suit, wrinkled, a white shirt that had probably been worn before, and a green tie with yellow stripes, which was crooked. So was the battered felt hat on his head. When he saw me, he raised his hand and came weaving toward the table.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, kid, but I just remembered a call I had to make." He did not sit down. "No drink?" He turned. "Waiter! How about a little service, huh, bub?"

A number of heads swiveled anxiously in Walter's direction.

I said, "Walter, please sit down, the waiter will be along. The stuff in the paper was fabulous. You must tell me everything. Did you write all night long?"

Walter was still standing, one hand on the back of his chair, his body half turned to the room. "What kind of joint is this?" he bellowed.

"Walter," I said. "Sit down."

"Ah, here we go. And isn't it about time, my man. You've ignored this lady and she would like a drink."

The waiter stared at Walter. I said, "A Manhattan, please."

Walter turned to me. "How civilized, a Manhattan. I'll have scotch, a double. Ice. And quickly, my man. Time is money."

Walter yanked out his chair, bumping the man seated behind him. The man turned around and gave Walter an angry look. Walter mumbled, "Sorry, pal," and clumsily seated himself. Then he pulled off his hat and plunked it down in the middle of the table. He looked at me with rheumy eyes and a sweet smile. "I'm glad to see you, Paris." He squinted. "Though it's hard to see you. Through that hat."

He began patting his breast pockets. I held out my cigarettes.

Walter glanced at the pack of Chesterfield's, put one hand on the table and started to rise. "I want Camels. Waiter!"

I clamped my hand on his. "Walter, listen to me. Walter. Sit down." I handed him a cigarette. "I went over to MGM today. I had lunch with this ring-a-ding named Yvette Sands. She's another one of Jack Seeberg's girls. And she told me this story about Anne and Mrs. Seeberg. Are you listening, Walter?"

"Give me a light." I leaned forward to light his cigarette. And caught a whiff of Walter. A sour odor of sweat with a high alcohol content, and stale nicotine.

Walter settled back in his chair. He waved his cigarette. "The wife and the girlfriend. I think I've heard it before."

"No you haven't. Anne is in a jewelry store and—"

"Maybe we should be using you on the Dahlia case. That's what we're calling her, the Black Dahlia. Reporters we got don't know nothing. You could do just as well."

"Why don't you go out, Walter? You could get stuff."

"I mean, they're punching the clock. Whoever heard of reporters caring what hours they keep."

"Walter, I'm talking about you. You going out."

"This kid, Buzzie something, he gets the chief of police's name wrong. Nice? The hell with it."

I lit a cigarette for myself. "Shall I go on, Walter. About Anne?"

"Go on about anything you want. Hell with those kids at the paper."

Except for *this* kid, I thought. I was Walter's proxy. I had never flattered myself by thinking Walter was doing me a favor. He was using me in a blind attempt to pull the rug out from under the paper's eager young reporters who were now crawling all over the stories that once would have been his. He was using me because he could accept a victory by me easier than he could from them, partly because he would have engineered it and partly because I was a woman who needed his help. I didn't resent him. No one else at the paper had even bothered to take the time with me.

"So Anne was picking out this brooch—"

"Did somebody die?"

"Pardon me?"

"The black. And what's with the veil routine? You going to a funeral or something?"

The waiter arrived with our drinks. I grinned. "You don't like it, huh?"

The waiter set down my drink.

"It's just that I thought maybe I'd get some cleavage. You know what that is. It's when you take a girl to a fancy joint, she wears something low-cut. Lets a guy peek at her tits once in a while. But not you. You show up in widow's weeds rolled up to your neck."

The waiter's hand, with Walter's scotch in it, froze midway between his tray and the table. Walter was grinning at me. I did not smile back. Carefully the waiter put the drink down and skittered away.

I said, "That was nice, Walter. Is there more?"

He raised his glass. "Sorry. Here's looking, kid."

"I mean, I can leave, Walter. And then, gosh, you'd have your pick. A whole roomful of girls dying to be with a man who looks like he just stepped off the cover of *Holiday* magazine."

"Thanks," Walter said.

"I only thought since this sounded important, that you wanted to hear."

"I want to hear. Sorry. Go on."

"Okay. Well, she—"

"Your veil's short. It's not like I can't see your lips move."

I nearly tossed my drink in his face. I had never seen him like this. I had always suspected that he maintained his serious drinking hours in private haunts, away from people at the paper. But this, this was more than just a sloppy slip-up.

I set my drink on the table. He was looking at me with amusement, waiting; wanting to see if I would sink to his occasion.

I held onto my anger. "Then watch them move, Walter. Because I am not going to do this. What you want, what this is really all about, is you want me to humor you through the night. Correct? So you can go to work tomorrow, *again*, and write somebody else's story, *again*. But then what? I mean, who's going to humor you tomorrow night?"

"Humor ain't exactly what I'm looking for, doll. It's more like a three-letter word that's Greek to you."

He reached into his pocket.

"It's not the word that's Greek, Walter. It's the word association. Sex is not a word I would ever associate with you."

Two crumpled dollar bills landed on the table. They were followed by several sheets of copy paper, folded in half. I went for the copy paper; Walter went for his scotch. And drained it. Of course he would drain it. Then he jammed his hat on his head. I braced for his parting shot.

He rose unsteadily to his feet.

"I got to take a leak, 'scuse me." Walter Ainsley said.

I sat in the backseat of the Bentley and cried half the way home. I was indignant. I was tragic. I cried out of sheer frustration. After that, I got angry all over again and cried some more. As I burbled in the back, my hat on the seat beside me, Bret made soothing noises in the front.

"Did you eat?" was one of them.

"Of course I didn't eat. How could you ask me if I ate?"

"Do you want to eat?"

"No, I don't want to eat. I was just totally humiliated in front of hundreds of people."

"Do you want me to drive for a while?"

"Yes. Straight into the ocean."

A chorus of sighs from the front blended harmoniously with the sobs from the back.

Eventually . . . "You should stay away from that man, Miss Chandler."

"But he needs help. And I couldn't . . . do you have any Kleenex? This box is empty now. How could he behave like that?"

Suddenly I realized we had stopped. More than stopped. We had parked. "What are you doing?" I said to Bret. I squinted out the side window. We were across the street from Schwab's drugstore.

Bret cut the ignition. "I'm going to buy you a big, thick chocolate milk shake, Miss Chandler. With whipped cream on top."

He got out of the car and came round to open my door. I said, "But I don't want—"

He held out his hand.

"And then, after you finish the whole thing . . . ?"

"I don't want the whole thing."

"—I'll drive you into the ocean."

". . . Prepare for a serious romantic talk with your mate. A second honeymoon may be in the offing."

20

The day of Anne Bardon's funeral dawned with typical Southern California perversity: sunny, dewy, and heading for seventy. I felt bad for her, having to play out her final scene against a backdrop so impervious to her tragedy. She should have died someplace else, somewhere more hospitable to pathos. In L.A., pathos only worked as a dramatic device in the movies.

I put on a black Larry Aldrich suit and a wide-brimmed black hat with a long veil, and then I thought about Lauralee and Yvette. I took the hat off and pinned my hair on top of my head. With the hat back on I looked in the mirror and decided it would be difficult for either one to recognize me at a distance.

Shortly after ten, Bret and I left the house. On the way I read more of the latest developments in the Elizabeth Short case, or as the stories repeatedly referred to her, "the fiend's victim." The lead story said:

> *Even as her identity was being established came the discovery that perhaps four hours before the murder, the victim, fearful, distraught, and weeping, had run for aid and protection to a policewoman.*
>
> *"My boyfriend, a discharged schizophrenic Marine, threatened he'd kill me," she told Officer Myrl O. McBride.*
>
> *Miss McBride said the girl had run into her in a bus station at Sixth and Los Angeles streets.*
>
> *Officer McBride then accompanied Miss Short to a bar, where the girl said she had fled from the Marine. There her purse and wraps were recovered and the girl left the policewoman to return to the bus depot.*
>
> *"My daddy's coming in at 10:30, abut two hours from now," she explained.*

Five pages of coverage followed. My story was on page six. And it carried my first byline, the work of Walter, I suspected. Reporters rarely got bylines the first time around. By Paris Chandler, it said, under the two-column headline: DEAD STARLET'S BOYFRIEND TALKS, SKIPS TOWN.

It was a carefully sanitized report, making no mention of Anne's alleged pregnancy nor her still unconfirmed liaison with Jack Seeberg. Mr. Hearst forbid licentious innuendo in his newspaper. Presumably due to the skeletons in his own closet.

Twenty minutes later, we were pulling up in front of St. Victor's, a fairly large Spanish-style church on Holloway. As I walked toward the double black doors, I wondered if George Healy would be here and realized for the first time how much I wanted this story to be mine. However deceitful and manipulative Anne Bardon had been, there was something about her life that touched dark places in my own soul. I didn't know why.

No other mourners were in sight as I entered the church. I stepped into a dark, cool vestibule and lowered my veil. From inside the nave, an organist was tapping out the low strains of a funeral dirge.

"Good morning."

I blinked. I hadn't noticed him standing in the doorway to the nave, a young man in a black suit forcing a smile, thinly coated with bereavement. "You are Miss . . . ?"

"Excuse me?"

"This is a private mass, due to the wishes of the family. If you were invited, I'd have your name on this list." He held up a piece of paper to show me.

"Sara Smith." I sighed deeply. "But you won't have my name on a list. I knew Anne only slightly."

He put his smile away.

"But perhaps you could tell me where she is going to be buried. I'd like to send along flowers."

"The deceased is going to be buried in Iowa, I was told."

"Thank you," I said.

I sat in the car chewing my lip. "They can't close a church to the public like that, can they?"

"For enough money," said Bret, "I think they can."

"Well at least I can see who comes out. From what I've read, killers sometimes come to funerals. See if anyone looks vaguely familiar to you. Like you've seen him lurking around somewhere before. And maybe they'll have a wake after. We'll follow."

"Don't worry, Miss Chandler. If he's here, I'll know it. I can always tell the bad guy." Bret adjusted his cap in the rearview mirror. "I've got a real nose for it."

It couldn't have been much of a mass, for barely thirty minutes passed before they came trooping sadly out of St.

Victor's. I watched them from my rear window. The group gathered on the sidewalk was surprisingly small. I counted only fifteen.

It was easy to spot her parents, a thin, elderly couple, poorly dressed. Her father, tall and sallow, stood alone, expressionless, his bony wrists hanging out from a jacket that didn't fit him. Her mother, standing several feet away, wore a dress that was too long and thick black shoes with laces. She had short, tightly curled gray hair and a round face, and she was clutching the arm of a red-cheeked girl with a long black braid. A man was bent over her, talking intently, but the woman's eyes kept roving helplessly. The man was Jack Seeberg.

To the right of them, Lauralee Hart and Yvette Sands huddled with two other attractive young women and a man. In time, the mourners began drifting off to their cars.

Seeberg helped the Babiches and the girl with the braid into the backseat of a limousine, then pulled down the jump seat and climbed in after them. No one else seemed to be following the limo as it sped along Wilshire toward downtown; apparently there would be no wake. The limo turned right on Olive, floated around a couple of corners and sighed to a stop in front of the Biltmore Hotel.

"Gee," I said, "the Babiches must feel right at home here." I told Bret to wait.

Inside the cavernous lobby, Seeberg conferred with a bellman while the family stood miserably nearby. I saw him hand the bellman a bill, which quickly disappeared into a pocket. Then the director spoke briefly to the family, turned and came my way. I ducked behind a marble pillar as he sailed by—long, sure strides, head held like a king's. The sad expression he had worn earlier had vanished. The look on Jack Seeberg's face as he swept out of the hotel was one of pure relief.

I caught up with him at the curb.

"Mr. Seeberg? Why, I thought it was you. Hello."

He turned slowly as his limo crept up alongside him. He tilted his head and looked at me. "Ah . . ."

I smiled through my veil. "And *you* said, 'We'll always have Paris.' Shame on you, Mr. Seeberg. I think you've broken my heart."

Jack Seeberg grinned. "If it isn't the mysterious Paris. The siren who left me waiting at the port. I was sure I'd never see you again."

I blushed. Not even on purpose . . . what was it about this man? "Then you do remember," I said quickly, noticing the cleft in his chin. "I'm so pleased." His driver had come around and was standing politely at Seeberg's left elbow. "Imagine, if I hadn't been stood up for lunch, I never would have run into you."

"Stood up? Why, how . . ."

"Inconvenient," I supplied. "I was counting on my friend for a ride home. But—what brings you all the way down here? I believe I saw you talking to an elderly couple just now."

"Yes. People from out of town. The parents of one of our actresses." He paused. "Sometimes you have to do these things."

I was surprised that he told me sort of the truth. I said, "And how is your wife getting along?" Trying to decide if I should stick with him or go back into the hotel.

"My wife? Do you know her?"

"I'm afraid not. I was only being polite. It must be awfully difficult, having a wife in a sanitarium."

"Mm," said Seeberg smiling. "You're very naughty, Miss Paris . . . Uh, I don't think you've told me your last name."

I returned his smile. "When your first name is Paris, you don't need a last name."

"Just as long as it isn't Sadowski or Yelnikov. But I'm afraid I must be running along."

He stepped back from the curb so his man could open the door.

"I don't suppose you could drop me somewhere, Mr. Seeberg?" Bret was in the Bentley directly in front of the limo. If you even open your door, I thought darkly, I'll kill you.

"Why, sure," said Seeberg. "Hop in."

I could tell Bret was watching from the rearview mirror. The door closed beside me and Seeberg went round to the other side.

"Where to, sir?" said the driver from behind the wheel.

"Take a left at the corner. I'll direct you."

"Do you always direct people?" I asked.

Seeberg laughed. "Yes. Does that unnerve you?"

He was sitting close to me, looking right into my eyes. I turned away from him. "Should it? I can't imagine why it would."

"A left here," he said.

"Are you directing anything in particular now?"

I should have been paying attention. But I was too busy planning how my line of questioning would go.

"A film called *Unfinished Dance*." He leaned into the deep leather seat. "Which is why I'm in such a hurry to get back. Otherwise, I would have taken you to lunch."

He ran his fingers along the back of my hand. "May I have a rain check?"

"Well, I don't know, Mr. Seeberg." I met his eyes. "Do *you* stand girls up?"

"Not you, *Miss Chandler*. Driver, pull over. Here we are."

The limo came to a stop. My eyes left Seeberg's and went to the window beside him. What they took in was Henry's Hamburger stand across the street. The driver climbed out. With a sinking feeling, I turned round to the right. We were parked in front of the *Examiner*.

My door swung open. A hand floated in.

I looked back at Seeberg. He was expressionless. "Like you said, one doesn't forget a name like Paris."

I said nothing.

". . . or Henry Tooker."

My mouth felt dry. "Well thanks for the lift."

He smiled. "I trust we'll see each other again."

I slid one foot onto the pavement. "I think you can count on that, Mr. Seeberg. Good-bye."

I stood on the curb, clutching my purse, watching the limo slip into traffic. Thinking, terrific, Paris, you really walked into that one. Wondering how much trouble I had just caused myself. Wondering if it had been the byline that had tipped him, or whether he had been tracking me all along. *Wondering* how dangerous this man really was.

A horn blasted. The passenger window of the Bentley slid down. "I have a meeting with my agent," Bret sang out. "All right?"

"No." I opened the rear door and got in. "We're going back to the Biltmore first."

Two dollars to the same bellman Seeberg had gifted bought me the number 602.

Mr. Babich answered my knock.

Close up I could see he was not as old as I had thought, but he had not worn his years particularly well. His sallow face was lined and pouchy. His hair, though thin, was still brown. Flakes of dandruff dotted the shoulders of his black jacket. He looked like a man who had died long before his daughter had. He stared at me with hotly burning eyes.

"Mr. Babich? My name is Paris Chandler. I . . . am so sorry about Anne. Please accept my condolences."

His mouth quivered. "Don't know any Anne."

"April. Forgive me, I—"

"Who is it, Augie?"

"Some friend 'a April's."

Mrs. Babich appeared suddenly in the shadow of her husband. She was holding a crumpled white handkerchief. Her eyes looked anxious.

Gently I said, "I thought maybe you'd like some company. I only knew April a little, but . . ."

For a moment, my sentence dangled, as I didn't know how else to approach them. I began to hope they would send me away.

"Well, Augie, step aside and let her in," Mrs. Babich said.

"I didn't see you at the church," Mr. Babich parried.

"No." I took a chance. "Mr. Seeberg didn't invite me."

"Augie, mind your manners and let Miss . . . ?"

"Paris Chandler, Mrs. Babich. But look, maybe I should go." *Please tell me to go.*

Without a word, Mr. Babich turned on his heel and marched ill-temperedly inside. I stepped into a long narrow hallway that connected the two rooms of the suite. Mrs. Babich led me through a doorway to the left, but not before I caught a glimpse of the girl with the braid standing in the doorway to the right. I was led into a large square sitting room. Two couches flanked a fireplace at one end, and a desk supporting a boxy radio stood at the other. A fancy floral arrangement dominated the table between the two couches. They were the only flowers in the room.

Mr. Babich walked angrily over to the desk, sat down and buried his face in a newspaper. Mrs. Babich sank onto one of the couches and motioned me to sit beside her. "You're very nice to come, Paris, and share our sorrow."

I decided not to take my hat off, but I lifted the veil back, saying, "She was a lovely girl. You must have been so proud of her."

Mrs. Babich gulped and brought the handkerchief up to her eyes.

"I'm so sorry . . . uh, may I bring you a glass of water?"

"No, dear, I'll be all right. And yes, we were so very proud of her. Imagine a small-town girl like April becoming a big movie star. She was such a determined little girl. But I was afraid she would live a life of bitter disappointment, aiming so high and all." She twisted the handkerchief in her hands. "I mean, the clothes, did you ever see such clothes? Mr. Seeberg took us over to her house before the funeral, and oh my, I thought he'd brought us to the home of a queen. Furs and—"

Suddenly she began to sob. Mr. Babich peered over the top of the paper and said, "Myra, you stop that talk. Talk only makes it worse."

"Yes, Augie." Mrs. Babich blew her nose.

I looked up. The girl with the braid was standing in the doorway. Without a word, she came up behind the gray-haired woman and began rubbing her shoulders. She smiled faintly. "Hello. I'm May, April's sister."

I could see the resemblance now, the same wide hazel eyes and the structure of the face. But May did not share her sister's beauty; it was marred by an overbite and a weak chin. I smiled. "Hello, May. I'm Paris Chandler. I'm—"

"Can I get you a Coke or something, Paris? We have a little icebox in the kitchen with some Cokes in it."

I politely declined and for a moment there was an awkward silence. I said, "I know April was planning a trip home. Did she visit often?"

"Never visited at all," came Mr. Babich's voice. "She got too fancy for her family."

"That's not true, Pa. She came home for Christmas that time."

"Two years ago, it was," Mrs. Babich put in. "But she kept in touch by post you know."

"Hmph," said Mr. Babich.

"The funny thing is, I guess she was planning to surprise us, because she never did tell us she was coming," Mrs. Babich continued. "But all her suitcases were packed like she was never coming back. It was Mr. Seeberg who told us April was coming home."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Do you know Mr. Seeberg? He's a big director who was so nice to April." She paused, getting all choked up again. "He paid for our trip out here to take April's body . . . oh Lord."

"Mama, Mama," May said soothingly.

Mr. Babich was on his feet. "I've had enough of this talk, Myra. The girl's dead. Talkin' ain't goin'ta change that. Miss Whatever-your-name-is, I think it's time you leave."

I reached over and squeezed Mrs. Babich's hand and then I stood up. May said, "I'll see her out," and came scooting after me. To my surprise she followed me into the hall and closed the door. "I'll walk you to the elevator, okay?"

"Are you going home today?" I inquired politely.

"Yes. On an airplane. Mr. Seeberg said it would be sadder to take the train. The plane is what's making my pa crazy."

"I can imagine."

At the elevator, I started to push the button but May stopped me. "Look, I know who you are, Paris. I saw your article in the paper today."

So much for the glory of bylines, I thought.

"Ma and Pa didn't, I knew it would upset them." She paused. "They didn't know about Henry Tooker."

"And . . . you did?"

"Uh-huh. April wrote me all about it. *I* knew she was coming home."

"To be married?" I was incredulous.

May bit her lip. "You didn't have it in the article, but . . ." She flushed.

Softly I said, "Then she told you she was pregnant?"

"She was coming home to have an . . . operation. I arranged it."

I should have thought of that, of course. She had made the play for Seeberg and it hadn't worked, he wouldn't marry her. Not only that, but by making life difficult for him, she had lost the part in his movie. What she had won was the right to be an unwed mother, not exactly a role that Anne Bardon would have auditioned for.

May said, "A boy she once knew is a doctor. He was going to do it."

"And after? She'd bought a train ticket to New York."

Now it was May who looked surprised. "Really? I didn't know. What she told me was that after the, you know, operation, she was going back to Hollywood to be in a movie."

Sneaky devil, right up to the end. The ticket to New York was a prop for Henry's sake. Send him off on a wild-goose chase. She would return to L.A. and tell Seeberg she had lost the baby and lobby to get her part back, take it away from Lauralee Hart. Meow.

"Did she mention anything about Henry coming?" I asked.

"She said if he did, to tell him she hadn't been there. What she was going to do, after the operation, when she was feeling better, was show up at the house and surprise the family and then get on the train and go back. Look, I'm telling you because I couldn't tell the police. My folks were in the room. But somebody should know this. Maybe it will help find—"

"*May Babich!* The heck you doing? You get your tail back here on the double, young lady, or I'll whup you good, hear me?"

May and I stared down the hall at the furious figure of her father ranting in the doorway. For a second, I could see the fear in her eyes. She smiled weakly.

And began trudging back toward her jailer.

21

My desk was littered with a dozen phone messages, which, like dust, had collected in my absence. They came from the usual cast of press agents, social climbers, name-dropping maitre d's, and other Hollywood tipsters who liked to spill their guts. I took off my hat and gloves and thumbed through the lot, then dumped all but two into the wastebasket. One was from my mother, who almost never called me at work. To do so would be a concession that I actually held a job. I got her on the line.

"I'm back," she exclaimed in her breathless voice. "It was raining." She paused. "I thought we could have dinner tonight, darling. You and that adorable Nicky person."

Involuntarily I glanced at Nick's vacant desk. I began to frame an excuse. Then I thought, why not? Nick had said he wanted to talk to me. And I . . . wanted to see him. I told my mother I'd get back to her. The second message was from Mrs. Keyes, saying that Lauralee Hart had called, and leaving me her number.

I dialed it. "Hi," I said. "It's Paris."

She laughed. "Well that was quick. I was wondering—what's all that noise?"

Theresa McKenzie, the matronly party reporter, had chosen that precise moment to hold court, five feet from my desk, over her latest tale of intrigue in Beverly Hills. Some abysmal story about Ronnie Reagan's daughter not having enough money to buy a sundae in Ruby's Drugstore. I put my hand over the mouthpiece and hissed, "Could you keep it down, please?" Then I said to Lauralee, "I'm at a friend's house, sorry. You were saying . . ."

"I thought maybe we could have lunch, even though it's late."

I glanced at the clock. "Sure. Where shall we meet?"

"You choose. Where do you like to go?"

Good question. If she, too, had seen the Tooker story, it didn't matter what I suggested. But if she hadn't, where would I, a kept woman, eat lunch? I told Lauralee I had shopping to do and how about if we met in the tearoom at Bullock's Wilshire. "Is 1:45 okay?"

She said it was.

"'Fine,' says Maureen, 'then I'll have a malted,'" Theresa McKenzie was saying.

I dialed another number.

"Yeah," said Nick.

"You wanted to talk."

"I'm with Etta now."

"Perhaps this evening then. Over dinner."

"Is this before or after drinks with Walter?"

". . . So Maureen gets up and walks away, leaving her nickel on the counter. And the boy says, 'Hey. You forgot your money.' And Maureen says—you ready for this? She says, 'Aw, leave it there. It won't buy anything anyway!'" Theresa McKenzie yelped.

I closed my eyes. "Cute, Nicky. The invitation comes from my mother. Specifically she invited me and, I quote, 'that adorable Nicky person.'" Across the half wall I saw Benny the Bookmaker working the newsroom. "I'm guessing that means you."

Nick's tone changed immediately. He said he'd be delighted. I told him I'd get back to him with details.

It was while I was standing in the ladies' room unpinning and brushing my hair that the idea struck.

I returned to Society and phoned my mother.

Theresa McKenzie was gone.

"Perhaps I ought to put another card on the table."

Lauralee Hart smiled.

It was not a friendly smile.

"Because I do not think you're reading my hand correctly at all."

"More tea?" said the waitress in the starched yellow uniform.

"Yes," I said.

"No," Lauralee said.

"Some dessert, ladies?"

"No," I said.

"Yes," Lauralee said. "A piece of apple pie."

She turned back to me. "I mean you can't really explain this as coincidence. First Anne. Then Yvette. You're not very clever, really."

I couldn't think until she swept that hair out of her eye. She was making me crazy, all those hair sweeps. During the war, when the government begged Veronica Lake to do something about her hair, lest all women in factories get their imitation hairdos caught in the machinery, it did not go far enough. The government should have outlawed all Veronica Lake hairdos on the grounds that it made anyone looking at them a nervous wreck.

Lauralee Hart swept the hair out of her eye. My concentration returned.

"Anne was my story, Lauralee, I told you that. When I ran into you at Gabriela's, I didn't know you knew her. How would I know?"

She picked up her fork and bent over the apple pie. The wing of hair flew forward.

"And now that I do know, I don't quite see . . ."

A quick accusing glance. "What about Yvette? You talked to her."

"Well yes. Anne did mention Yvette. Is there something I'm missing here?"

Lauralee put down her fork and narrowed her eyes. "You're spying on us, Paris. And I don't like it."

"How am I spying on you? I think Anne's murder has got you terribly upset. Look, she came to me. At the paper, like I said. Running into you at Gabriela's, well it just happened. If I'd known you knew Anne, I would have asked you about her. I would have asked you at Gabriela's."

"You didn't say you were a reporter then."

"It didn't exactly come up."

"You made it sound like . . ."

Her voice trailed off. She had changed from her black funeral dress into a snappy little red suit, and she wore bright red lipstick that somehow did not rub off on her Bullock's club sandwich. She had arrived first. And as soon as I had joined her I could see that something was wrong. We had made the usual small talk, and then halfway through our sandwiches she got to the point. I was Paris Chandler, reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, was I not?

"The *Examiner*," I said woodenly. And inwardly winced. Even without the byline, I simply hadn't been thinking. Anne knew my name was Paris. Lauralee had met a Paris at the beauty salon. Yvette had apparently mentioned her lunch at the commissary with me. When your name is Paris you do not stay anonymous for long.

I dropped a cube of sugar in my tea, saying, "Lauralee, I have my problems, too. You're an actress. I'm a reporter. I make $57.50 a week. You're under contract, you make more. I live in a big house. I wear nice clothes." I flashed some teeth. "Now how do you suppose I do that?"

Lauralee supposed fast. She grinned back, showing her complement of little white teeth. "Jack might like you, actually."

I said nothing and reached for my tea. It was scalding.

Lauralee was watching me carefully. I put down the tea. "You know she was leaving town, don't you? She told me nothing about it, which made me angry, frankly, since I was writing this story. Why do you suppose she would do that?"

"She's from Iowa. Or some place with a vowel." Forking off a piece of pie.

"But pack her bags and just leave? I hear she was going to star in one of Jack's movies."

"My dear," said Lauralee, laying down her fork, "she was pregnant."

"Seriously?"

"It would have created a scandal, she had to leave town."

"Pregnant by Jack?"

Lauralee laughed. "Doubtful. The word is he can't."

"Can't? Sterile you mean? Then he must have been angry knowing . . . but who was the father?"

Lauralee leaned forward. "Look Miss Reporter. The only thing I'm going to tell you is that Jack's wife found out and she was furious. Furious enough to . . . God knows what."

"But you just said he was unable to . . ."

Lauralee swept her hair back. "He believed her, she got him to believe it. You know how men are. They'll believe anything."

"So she was going to Iowa to have the baby, is that it?"

"She was going to Iowa to have an accident, knowing her."

"Oh, Lauralee, you can't mean that."

"You're a riot, Paris. You think Anne cared about a baby? She cared about her career. Just between us she was terribly jealous of my relationship with Jack. She was turning into a real drag."

"Mm. Well look, I must run. I hope there are no hard feelings, Lauralee. I certainly didn't mean to deceive you. It's funny Anne . . . er, you know it just struck me. This Black Dahlia case? Did you ever run into her, Elizabeth Short? Or do you know if Anne did?"

"Of course not," Lauralee said quickly. "She was a tramp."

"Well. As I was saying, it's funny that Anne never mentioned you. Had you seen her lately?"

"Not really. We had a falling out. And besides, I usually see Jack alone, or with Kiki." She tossed her head. "Anne worked alone."

"Excuse me?"

She was fishing through her purse, locating her compact.

Finding it, checking her face in the mirror, not looking at me. She began applying lipstick, speaking to the mirror. "It's just a part of your job you'd rather not do." She glanced up. "You must have parts of your job you'd rather not do."

I reached for the check. A dollar fifty for the sandwiches. Twenty-five cents for the pie and tea. Lauralee Hart had been an expensive interview.

She was still looking at me, wanting me to tell her I had parts of my job that I'd rather not do.

I smiled brightly.

"Let's split it," I said.

It began to rain while I was on the bus, even though the sun was shining. This happened fairly often, although I could think of no meteorological explanation for it. More likely the explanation was cultural: L.A. keeping up appearances at any cost.

By the time I got off at Hill Street and Eighth, where I had to transfer to the streetcar, it was pouring. I had told Bret he didn't have to wait at Bullock's, and now I was four blocks from the paper with no streetcar in sight. I turned up the collar on my black wool jacket and scampered the rest of the way. Soaking wet, I dripped up to the second floor landing and over to my desk.

A long-stemmed rose was lying across it, paper-clipped to a manila envelope.

Scrawled in blue ink on the envelope was the following: *I never said I wasn't a bum. But you didn't deserve last night. Forgive me, kid. W.*

I opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of copy paper. On it, Walter had typed some notes regarding Anne Bardon. He said that according to the Department of Motor Vehicles, the yellow Nash was registered to her.

He also wrote:

> *The FBI called for you. You got nothing more to tell them, tell them.*
>
> *Coroner said she was eight weeks pregnant.*
>
> *Quit wasting time with the girlfriends and figure out a way to get your hooks into Seeberg.*
>
> *I'm going home. They gave me the day off.*

There was a postscript. "With regards to page six: Nice work."

I was still furious at him. But the "nice work" made me feel a little better. Coming from him. From Walter.

I was just siting down when I heard, "Chandler!" barked from somewhere behind me.

I swiveled round. Striding toward me, in a no-nonsense manner, was the doughy figure of Len Kramer, his face pinched in its habitual sour frown. Len was the assistant city editor, a nail-biting grouch who broke out smiles as if they were being war-rationed, or about once a week.

He arrived on the other side of my typewriter stand, announcing, "A call came in a while ago. But you weren't here." He made it sound like an indictable offense.

"Sorry," I said. "I was at lunch."

He gave me a withering look as if to say . . . lunch?

I smiled. "What was the call?"

"I'm told you've been working on the Anne Bardon murder, although I didn't know you had been assigned to it." Another indictment handed up.

"I wasn't," I said calmly. "But since I had actually dealt with her, I already had a lead or two. All I've done, really, is make a few inquiries."

"That's what Ainsley said. But homicide is not what you do here. You work strictly for Etta Rice."

I started to say I didn't think I was getting in anybody's way. But Len held up his hand.

"The point is, all my best boys are out on the Black Dahlia murder. So I'm going to let you handle this call." He looked fairly pained.

I said, "Fine."

"So call a guy named Arnie at the Sixth Street Garage, Sixth and Fairfax. This is the number." He thrust a scrap of paper at me. "He saw your Henry Tooker story and phoned the desk. Said something about the Bardon broad bringing her car in and not paying up. Walter heard whoever it was taking the call and said you should deal with it." He sounded dubious.

"I'll call him right away." I said, and started to reach for the phone.

"Just a minute," growled Len, "there's another thing.

Walter told me what you've been up to, and you're clearly on the wrong track."

I just looked at him. Oh really, I wanted to say. But before I could say anything, he continued.

"You're wasting your time with these broads. Walter thinks you should be sniffing around Seeberg, see what he knows."

"Agreed, but—"

"Especially considering she was pregnant. That's probably the last thing Seeberg needed. A knocked-up broad."

This guy was a real charmer. "Maybe," I said, "but these girls are a story, too. The way he controls them, the way they live their lives, I think it's important to write that."

"Then write it for *True Confessions,*" Len snapped. "It's the oldest story in Hollywood. They sell what they got to sell. We all sell what we got to sell. The story is older than time itself."

"I believe you're missing the point."

"Yeah? Gimme the point."

"In selling what we've got, most of us don't have to sell our self-respect."

"Most of us aren't Catholics. The broad was a Catholic."

"Huh?" I said.

"They get forgiven on Sunday. Call the garage. If the guy has anything to say, go over there. We'll send a photographer with you."

I phoned the garage and got Arnie on the line. He told me that Anne had brought her car in on January sixth. It rattled and it died a lot. Arnie said the repairs were made and the car was driven to her house on the eighth, as prearranged. No one had answered the door bell, so Arnie put the keys under the front seat and slipped a note under her door telling her that; a note the police had obviously found, since Walter and I hadn't. He also left the bill, which came to $25.63. No payment had ever come.

"So maybe that Tooker fellow would like to pay it," was why Arnie undoubtedly had called.

I asked if he had been at the garage when Anne brought the car in. Yes he had. "I had a quick look under the hood to give her some idea of what was wrong. I told her she needed new plugs and a muffler. The best I could do was deliver it in two days."

"Do you have any idea how she got home?"

"Uh, some dame was waiting for her in a car."

"Do you remember what the girl looked like?"

"She never got outta the car. All I saw was dark hair and a pair of sunglasses. Blue DeSoto. Postwar model."

I thanked Arnie and hung up. And thought. The car was delivered the day after Anne Bardon was killed. Which explained why her car had not been found at the beach. Someone had driven her to the beach the night she died. The question was who, and had Who killed her?

I found Len in the city room and made my report. Thankfully he did not think the information warranted a trip to the Sixth Street Garage. In fact, he did not think the information warranted a story at all. "We got too much Dahlia stuff for this kind of filler," he grumbled, reaching for his ringing phone and thus dismissing me.

I went back to Society, finished up my chores for Etta, phoned Nick and told him to pick me up at seven. The FBI did not call me again. I did not call the FBI.

Nick arrived ten minutes late and crabby, not like Nick at all, on either count. When I came downstairs, he was standing in the hall pacing impatiently. He barely said hello before tugging at his sleeve to look at his watch.

"Ready?"

I smiled. "Let's have a drink first."

I led him into the study and fixed two highballs. Mrs. Keyes had built a blazing fire. I spent a moment shuffling through a stack of records before dropping "Goin' to Chicago Blues" on the phonograph. When I turned back, Nick was sitting on the edge of the couch, tapping his foot on the floor.

I slipped into the red leather chair, opened the lid of the silver cigarette box and extracted a Chesterfield. Nick was watching me without expression. He was wearing a white flannel suit, white shirt, and navy tie. His skin was lightly tanned, emphasizing the whites of his eyes. His dark hair, longer than usual, curled just around his ears. He looked gorgeous.

"Relax, Nicky. We don't have to be there till eight. I wanted to have a chat first."

"Fine." He turned his face away from me and gazed into the fire.

"I can't get over Tee," I remarked. "You must tell me more. In fact, you never said how you met. She doesn't seem to be someone you would meet in the normal course of your rounds."

Nick shot me a look. "What does that mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. I'm curious."

"I, um, met her at the dentist. We were both in the waiting room." Nick reached for his glass.

"And is it through her you began to hear things about the card game?"

"Yeah," said Nick. "Through Tee."

"Mm." I puffed on my cigarette. Above the sweet sounds of Basie, and from far down the hall, I could hear Mrs. Keyes making a racket in the kitchen. Her sister would be coming for her soon to take her away for the weekend, and the racket was her way of letting me know I would soon be deprived of her. "Perhaps we should all get together," I said.

"Why?"

"Because if you want me to find out about these crooked card games, I need to know what she knows. Though it seems to me she is in a better position to see what's going on. She's inside."

"She knows there's cheating. But she hasn't been able to figure out how. I thought maybe one of those Arthur people could tell you something."

The racket subsided, along with Count Basie. I didn't get up. I watched Nick, thinking hard.

"I'm not sure they could. I mean if Arthur or any of the others seriously thought they were being set up, why would they continue to play?"

Nick smiled suddenly. "Good point," and swallowed some of his drink.

"So you're saying . . ."

"I'm saying someone should get to the bottom of this."

Something was off. I couldn't understand why he cared, based on what he was telling me. I exhaled. "Is Tee investigating this for somebody?"

"No. She's just suspicious."

"Then what makes you think the D.A. might be looking into it?"

He put his glass down roughly, spilling some of his drink. "Stop giving me the third degree, Paris. I . . . just know."

I worked on the highball. I decided to give it one last shot, before I got up and punched him.

"Well I can't play cards to save my life, Nicky. But if you want me to keep poking around, I will."

No response.

"Do you?"

Staring at the coffee table, "Yes."

"And what would you like me to find out, specifically."

"Anything. But, uh, specifically, who's cheating and how."

"Uh-huh," I said.

Nick looked up. "See, it could be a conspiracy. Several guys involved. They take turns winning, but they share. A lot of money changes hands in those games. Somebody's got to be losing a bundle and maybe will talk."

"Then you're saying some of the boys share Tee's suspicions? Who?"

"I don't know who. But somebody has to be wondering. I mean, they're not stupid."

"But if somebody's losing big and thinks the game is fixed, why would he continue to play?"

"Maybe because he's hooked and thinks he can turn his luck. Or because he wants to get to the bottom of it. Cheating's against the law. Someone's caught, he could go to jail and the money might be paid back." Nick glanced at his watch. "Shouldn't we be going?"

"In a minute," I said. "I just need to know how important this is to you. I mean, are you trying to break a story or just impress your girlfriend?"

He tossed back the rest of his drink. "The story, of course."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do."

Nick stood up, eager to go. I crossed my legs and took another sip of whiskey. "Not so fast, Nicky."

I smiled. "We haven't talked about me yet."

22

My parents' house, perched atop Mulholland Drive, twinkled brightly in the night—as if it were the crowning jewel of Los Angeles. A well-preserved prewar black Pierce-Arrow was cooling its tires out front.

"This looks good," I said. "Just park anywhere, okay?"

Nick pulled up behind the Pierce-Arrow and cut the engine. "Now let me get this straight. I deal with him, you deal with her."

"Before dinner. Then we switch partners." I stared at the Pierce-Arrow. "Assuming this is them."

Before we left my house I had filled Nick in on the possibilities of the evening ahead. I told him I had asked my mother to invite the Seebergs to dinner, explaining that Nick was working on his first screenplay and, to impress him, I thought it would be nice to have, in addition to my father at the dinner table, a top-line director like Jack Seeberg.

In truth, I didn't give a fig about Nick and his screenplay. I had simply decided that I didn't want to play games with Seeberg anymore. I had thought if I could lure him onto my territory, feed him a few drinks, *then* grill him, maybe I could get somewhere.

I still had one card to play.

Although he knew I was working on the Anne Bardon story, and might have guessed Henry Tooker had mentioned his name, what he would not know, until I waltzed in the front door, was that I was Paul Masterson's daughter.

So he would show up tonight, hopefully, and either he would be square with me or he wouldn't. But at least, I told myself, if he had been involved in Anne's death, if he had *murdered* her, he would think twice about hurting me, Paul Masterson's *daughter*.

To which Nick had grumbled, "So that's what this is all about." And I had said, thinking I had been so clever, weaving this web, "But I thought you would enjoy it." Adding, "I still don't know if they're coming though."

And he had said, "You're really something, Paris." And I said "Meaning . . . ?" And he had said, "You sure move right along, don't you? Using whoever you can."

I was stunned. Hadn't I just gone through that whole card-game routine with him? Trying to help *him*. The ungrateful lout. Thinking, the cad. Picking up my purse, walking out the door, really furious, saying through clenched teeth, "Is it possible that I could have learned it from you?"

And on that cheery note, we drove up to Mulholland in rigid silence, staring straight ahead. Wanting to kill each other.

As usual.

"Paris, dear, you remember Helen Seeberg, don't you? Helen, this is my daughter, Paris."

"Paris," Helen Seeberg breathed. "What a lovely name. So unusual."

"It's where my parents met," I explained. "You've probably heard the story."

"I'm afraid not," Mrs. Seeberg said. "Do you think I should?"

I laughed. "Not unless you're a hopeless romantic like my mom. It was during the war. The first war. Or so I'm told."

"Really," said Mrs. Seeberg. "Mm. Hmm."

"Yes. Before America got involved, my father was fighting for the British. And he met my mother, who was doing vaudeville. Somehow, they lost track of each other and—"

"How fascinating," said Mrs. Seeberg with a yawn. "I must ask your mother all about it."

"It gets pretty convoluted, I'm afraid. Uh, let me present my friend Nick Goodwin, Mrs. Seeberg."

Nick, I'll have to grant him that, put aside his grouchiness and switched on all cylinders of his dimpled charm.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Seeberg," he oozed, squeezing her hand and showing all of his teeth. "My what a lovely bracelet."

The bracelet, a wide band of emeralds and diamonds, formed an intimidating piece of armor on Mrs. Seeberg's large bony wrist. Fenced, it could have fed China.

Mrs. Seeberg smiled. "And are you a romantic as well?"

"I'm afraid so," sighed Nick, injecting a note of tragedy into his voice. "Unfortunately it's not a romantic time."

"No," agreed Mrs. Seeberg sadly. "They're putting parking meters downtown."

"Exactly!" cried Nick. "Why suppose Romeo had to keep popping pennies in meters every twelve minutes when he went to visit Juliet? Or poor Heathcliff, roaming the moors, searching his riding breeches for a spare coin? You are absolutely right. Parking meters are a perfect metaphor for our time."

"Nick isn't his real name," I broke in. "It's Rudolph Valentino."

Nick sat down beside Mrs. Seeberg, which made me cross. I sat down on the middle couch and wondered where her husband was. My mother, wearing a floor-length navy-blue hostess gown, sat down next to me. My father brought us drinks.

"I love to cry and my dentist believes that if you don't cry often and release the tension, you'll have trouble with your gums," my mother said. "So I often read novels that make me cry." She touched the pearls around her neck. "Personally, the Shakespeare tragedies never worked for me."

"The Brontës are better," inserted Nick.

"Who's your dentist?" inquired Mrs. Seeberg skeptically. "I've never heard that theory before."

I kept my eyes attentively on Mrs. Seeberg. Even though I had caught a glimpse of her at my parents' party, I still, in my mind, conjured up a sort of frumpish, sweet-natured woman, whose face was forever etched in lines of wifely sacrifice and hurt.

Wrong.

Jack Seeberg's wife was a tall, statuesque woman in her late thirties, with short dark hair that curved forward at the jaw, and large brown eyes. She had a prominent, though nicely shaped nose, and thin lips. Her pale skin looked as if it had been permanently sealed from direct sunlight. She was handsome rather than pretty; her clothes, I imagined, were always perfectly tailored and proper. Tonight she was wearing a stunningly simple green wool dress and matching cropped jacket. Her fingernails were cut straight across and unpolished. I noticed she did not wear a diamond ring, but a simple gold wedding band.

She looked like a human recruitment poster for the L.A. Country Club.

"Dr. Rosenblatt, Herb Rosenblatt," my mother was saying. "He's on Canon. Hilda Kriss recommended him to me. He gives you gossip while he drills."

Mrs. Seeberg sniffed. "I know his wife. She's trying to buy her way on to the Opera Board. She had Mayor Bowron call me personally, if you can imagine."

My mother stood up. "Excuse me, everyone. I must check on the kitchen."

"Allow me to help," urged Nick, who was on his feet instantly. It wasn't as if my mother were whipping up a dinner or anything. Clementine did that. But as part of her show of informality, she insisted on carrying the food forth herself. Looping her arm through Nick's, the two exited.

"It's a shame Jack can't be here," said my dad, leaning forward on his couch and reaching for a handful of peanuts. "My daughter is quite a fan. She had me bring home some of his films recently, didn't you, Paris?"

Oh, swell, Dad. Real Jake.

I gulped. "I am a fan, yes, of course, Mrs. Seeberg. We all are. But I wanted the movies really for Nick. He's trying to be a screenwriter and he's quite taken with the way your husband puts his films together." I paused. "He isn't ill, I hope."

"Not at all," said Mrs. Seeberg cheerfully. "He's supposed to start shooting *Unfinished Dance* next week and he's still at the studio talking with the costume people. It's such a crazy business. Poor Jack never seems to have a night to himself anymore."

"That must make it difficult on you," I remarked.

"I suppose. But he loves what he does, and that's what's important."

Nick and my mother reappeared, he bearing a tray of cooked shrimp on toothpicks, she a platter of pigs-in-blankets. This was followed by all of us trooping into the kitchen to help ourselves to sliced roast beef and mashed potatoes, which we then carried back and ate in the Family Living Room. It wasn't until my mother was clearing the plates, and Nick had settled in to learn the finer points of screenwriting from my dad, that I had a chance to corner Mrs. Seeberg.

"I don't know if my mother mentioned to you that I work for the *Examiner*," I began, knowing full well that my mother would have slit her wrists first.

"Why, no." Helen Seeberg's eyes flickered over me curiously. "How interesting."

"Yes, at times it is. I felt I really needed to do something with myself after my husband died. It gets me out, you know."

"Of course," said Mrs. Seeberg. "Why shouldn't you work? I'm heavily involved with charities. It's useful and I'm happy to do it. But sometimes I want to scream, listening to the girls discussing their manicures." She paused. "You'll remarry, of course."

I smiled. "I hope so." I picked a thread off my skirt. "In the meantime it struck me that we have something in common. The paper has me writing a story about the wives of Hollywood men. You know, what it's like being married to the men who make the movies. I would love a chance to talk with you. Perhaps next week?"

Mrs. Seeberg carefully folded the white linen napkin that was on her lap, folded it into a big square, then set it on the coffee table. Her left hand started fingering the bracelet on her right arm. I began to wonder if she had heard me. "I would be talking to others as well."

"I've always liked the *Examiner*," she said suddenly. "I think Mr. Hearst is perfectly right in his concern about encroaching communism." She looked at me sharply. "Don't you?"

"His support of Senator McCarthy is causing quite a stir," I hedged. "Have you been to San Simeon?"

"Oh yes, many times. Though not lately. He's not as active as he once was, I hear. I believe he's quite old."

"But hardly silent," I said, grinning. "Notes from 'The Chief' still cause panic at the paper. Anyway, could I drop by and see you on Monday?" My mother was on her way back, carrying another tray of something. "I wouldn't need much of your time."

My own pincer's movement, I thought. Let Jack Seeberg know I was coming at him from two sides.

"Oh, ice-cream-cake roll," exclaimed Mrs. Seeberg approvingly.

"With fudge sauce," added my mother, lowering the tray. "Paris, dear, why don't you serve. I'll get the coffee."

I sliced five pieces of cake roll, put each on a plate, handed them out, then carried the silver bowl of fudge sauce around. "May I?" I said to Mrs. Seeberg, dipping the serving spoon into the fudge.

"Just a little, dear, thank you. I don't know what I can tell you that's interesting, but if you like, come by at four o'clock."

I said I would be there.

Thinking, it would be interesting. No matter what.

Nick barreled down Coldwater Canyon in better spirits than he moped up it. "Your father's a great guy. He offered to look at my screenplay anytime."

I said that was nice.

"And I owe you an apology from before. I was in a foul mood. I'm sorry."

Think nothing of it, I said.

"If only I could sell it, you know? Everything would be okay."

I said I was sure that he would.

He said, pulling into my drive, "You want company?"

I stared straight ahead. "It looks like I already have some."

Parked off to the right, directly in front of the garage, stood the snouty shape of an old Chevrolet. My eyes drifted upward. The windows in Bret's room over the garage were lit. Dick Haymes, singing "You Make Me Feel so Young," filtered out. "I wonder if Bret has someone up there," I said. "Bret never has anyone up there."

"Let's go see who it is," said Nick wickedly.

I looked at him. "What do you mean if you sell your script everything will be okay. What's not okay?"

"Really, everything's fine. Sort of. I just mean I'm feeling ready to leave the paper. Try something else. And I'm tired of scraping along on newspaper pay." He turned in his seat and touched my shoulder. "Let me come in, Paris."

I said, "Are you broke?"

"No, I'm fine." He began stroking my shoulder. "I just want to be able to keep you in the style you're accustomed to."

"Well, I'm going to bed. Thanks for a lovely evening."

Nick's hand dropped off my shoulder and caught my wrist. "You're still angry. I can tell you are."

"I'm not angry." I pulled my wrist free. "I'm confused."

"About me?"

"Yes, about you."

Nick looked at me, not moving, keeping his eyes on me too long. "Maybe I'm confused about you, too. Let's go inside and talk about it."

"I'm too confused to talk about why I'm confused. Besides, I have to work tomorrow."

I turned and looked through my side window at the house, wishing Mrs. Keyes hadn't gone away with her sister, so that she would fling open the door and stand there obtrusively.

"I want to know about your husband, look at me."

"He has nothing to do with us." I was angry again.

"I think he does. Something about him or his death has a hold on you. I think you won't let go."

"I—"

Suddenly the garage door flew open and out scampered Bret, a giggling Betty Fox on his heels. He opened the door to her car and helped her in, both convulsed with laughter.

I smiled. Feeling a twinge of envy.

"Who's that?"

"A friend of Anne Bardon's. She can't get out." I turned away from the window and leaned over and kissed Nick on the cheek. "Your car is blocking her. I'll see you next week."

I opened the door and stepped out.

I could feel Nick's eyes on me as I climbed the steps to my house. I turned and waved to Betty. Then I put my key in the lock.

I stood inside the front door breathing hard. Until I heard him pull away.

". . . Juggling two loves at once may be possible, but eventually it will undermine all considered worthwhile. Make a choice!"

23

Bret was saying, "I think it was the grunt that did it." Sounding quite sure of himself.

We were cruising along Olympic Boulevard at a fairly impressive clip. Traffic was sparse. At various corners, Mexicans in thin shirts leaned against lamp posts smoking brown cigarettes, waiting for someone to pull up and offer them a day's work. Bret glanced in the rearview mirror and raised his right hand to adjust his cap. He was wearing the black cap with the gold braid, the dress uniform below it. I only asked for the full getup when he was taking me somewhere fancy. The *Examiner* on a Saturday morning was not exactly the restaurant La Rue.

"So there I am on my knees, floundering around, see. Then I stop cold. I hold still for a long beat. Suddenly, I clutch my stomach and I go 'unh!' My face is all scrunched up. Like this." He swiveled round to let me see. I kept one eye peeled on the road ahead. "Then I keel over."

"I'm touched," I said.

"I'm pretty sure it was the grunt. Nobody else thought to grunt."

"Remarkable," I added, somewhat at a loss.

"So I'm going to be on location for four days next week." Bret checked the rearview mirror for my reaction. "I hope that will be okay."

"It's our deal," I said resignedly, although never before had Bret won a part that kept him away four days. Given his track record in the movie industry, it never occurred to me he would.

"And I'm taking Betty out to dinner tonight to celebrate," he continued. "Is it okay if I use the Chrysler?"

I said fine. Bret began to hum. I began to fret about lurching through L.A. with Mrs. Keyes at the wheel.

Stomach heavy, already feeling car sickness coming on.

Once at my desk, I turned my attention to the Items at hand. Namely, was Larraine Day going to marry Leo Durocher? I got as far as confirming that she had obtained a divorce decree from Ray Hendricks, her current husband. But, as Roxy explained to me on the phone from Etta's house, for Larraine to avoid waiting a year to remarry, she would have to seek a second divorce decree in Juarez, Mexico, where she planned to marry the manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers right away.

"Only make sure your second reference to him is Leo the Lip," Roxy said bossily. "And they're not the Brooklyn Dodgers, Paris. They're 'Dem Bums.' All *right*?"

"Er, isn't that libelous?"

"'Dem Bums,'" said Roxy with emphasis. "That's what they're called." She hung up.

I carried my suspicions down the hall into Sports. A guy I had never seen before was playing the typewriter keys, a hat that had surely been run over by a truck perched on his head.

"Excuse me," I said. "Do you know if it's libelous to call the Dodgers 'Dem Bums'?" I didn't trust Roxy at all.

The guy didn't look up. "You ask me, it's libelous to call 'em a baseball team." He kept typing away.

I spent a tiresome evening at the Kleghorns, trying not to yawn in Mr. Dreamboat's face. I fell into a state of polite attention, all the while thinking about Nick. Wondering what would happen if I called him when I got home and said something snappy like . . . Only I couldn't think of anything snappy. Finally, at eleven-thirty, I murmured to Wade Green that I would please like to go home now. I thanked the Kleghorns for a simply divine evening, pointedly ignoring Joan Kleghorn's furtive wink. The air was heavy with night-blooming jasmine as we cut across the lawns, our voices echoing against the deadened street.

As we reached my front steps, he said, "Aren't you lonely living in there by yourself?" Timing it just right.

I began searching my purse for the key. "I don't really live here by myself. I have a housekeeper and a driver."

"Still . . ."

"It was so nice to meet you." I held out my hand. "Good night."

He kept hold of my hand. "Perhaps we could go to a drive-in sometime."

I cast an uneasy glance up at Bret's apartment. It was dark. I didn't have many dates with men I didn't know and I couldn't remember ever coming home with one on a night when both Mrs. Keyes and Bret were gone.

I removed my hand, with, "Say, *that's* an idea. Or . . . *bowling*. Do you bowl, Mr. Green? Also, there's this new place to roller skate. I know that people from the East call us Cowtown, but you'd be surprised at all we have going on here." I turned up the wattage on my smile. "Well good night."

I breezed up the steps and let myself in, leaving the poor man down there trying to figure out what had just transpired. Once in my bedroom, I undressed quickly, dropping my black crepe trousers and my red silk blouse on the floor, and slipping into a pair of Billy's striped pajamas. Only on the nights when Mrs. Keyes was gone did I wear his pajamas. They made me feel less alone.

I washed my face and brushed my hair and eventually drifted down to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

A parcel was sitting on the table.

It was a small square box, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. My name and address had been printed in large black letters. Mystified, I yanked at the string and tore off the paper. I recognized the gold-colored box immediately: it was from Winston's, an expensive clothes store in Beverly Hills.

Smiling, thinking it was from my mother, I pulled off the lid. Atop the tissue paper was a small white envelope. I picked it up and held onto it as I pulled back the tissue. And then I froze.

It was lying on its back, little twig feet sticking up, head twisted to one side, staring up at me out of one fixed glassy eye.

Stomach churning, I ran out of the kitchen and sank onto the hall stairs, opened the envelope and removed a stiff white card. It read:

> APRIL DESERVED TO DIE. DON'T BE THE NEXT DEAD BIRD. FLY AWAY NOW, WHILE YOU CAN.

I could feel my heart pounding. Had someone broken into the house to deliver this? Or had it been left outside and brought in by Bret? I tried to think back. It certainly wasn't in the kitchen that morning when I had eaten breakfast. After work, running late, I had gone straight upstairs and dressed for the evening. Then out the front door when Wade Green arrived.

Bret. He had dropped me off at the paper around noon. Knowing I wouldn't need him, I had simply told him to be back by six. So the package could have been delivered in the afternoon and he could have put it in the kitchen.

I reached for the phone, dialing with unsteady fingers. Walter wasn't at the paper, wasn't home. No answer at Nick's . . . but what if the package had not come that afternoon? What if the sender had personally delivered it and was . . . lurking in the house.

I yanked open the closet door under the stairwell and grabbed my raincoat, pulling it on over my pajamas, tearing out of the house, slamming the door behind me.

Standing on the Kleghorn's door mat, trembling.

Saying, when Mick opened the door, surprised, "I heard a noise in my house. Do you mind if I spend the night?" Smiling, trying to look calm.

Then following his eyes down to my bare feet.

Eleven o'clock in the morning, nose wrinkled, eyes fascinated, Bret stood over the kitchen table staring at the dead bird.

He said, "It's an oriole, I think, poor thing. They broke its neck." He poked a finger in the box and began rubbing the bird's chest.

"So you didn't see anybody delivering it, right?"

Bret pulled back his finger, shaking his head. "No, it was on the stoop by the kitchen door. I was coming in to raid the refrigerator and"—he shot me an apologetic look—"I just picked up the box and put it on the table."

"That was—when?"

"After I dropped you off at the paper."

"So who knows when it was left there. I mean I haven't gone out that door in ages. And I don't know when Mrs. Keyes last opened it. How about you?"

"Oh I go in and out all the time," said Bret. "Let's see. Yeah. I went in Friday evening to speak with Mrs. Keyes before she left. It wasn't there then I'm pretty sure."

I glanced at the refrigerator. "Do you think I should put it in the ice compartment? I don't know what to do with it."

Bret grinned. "If you put it in the ice compartment you may end up eating it, knowing Mrs. Keyes."

"Oh ick."

"I'll put it in the garbage. That's safest."

"No. I might need it to show someone. You know, like evidence."

"Then I'll wrap it up and stick it in my refrigerator," Bret said. "It will give my refrigerator something to do."

Later, at the office, I kept circling the city room waiting for Walter to appear. I had finally gotten hold of Nick, who promised to meet me at my house after work. I began making a list of everyone I had spoken to about Anne Bardon. The list was long and had too many motives in it. Lauralee Hart despised her; Mrs. Seeberg should have been ready to kill her, literally; Tooker could have, I supposed, though the prospect didn't excite me; and then there was Jack Seeberg. I still liked Seeberg. And who knew who else had hated her guts.

. . . Kiki. And someone named Carole, whom Yvette had mentioned; the other girls in Seeberg's clique. It made sense to me to pursue them, despite what Walter and Len Kramer thought.

I stared at the second hand on the big Society clock. The two warn-off notes I had received had been printed with a soft-lead pencil. But the writing, sloppy and childlike, was not obviously the same on both; it was sort of the same. Would *two* people be trying to frighten me? Where, I thought, was Walter?

I wandered back to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, wondering how to locate Carole without asking Lauralee or Yvette.

Back at my desk, I reviewed several options, such as trying to finagle Carole's name from Walter's real estate source, but none of the options thrilled me. I stubbed out my cigarette, picked up the phone and asked the operator to find Yvette Sands's number for me.

I called it.

And got her answering service.

I reached the operator again. This time I asked for Yvette Sands's address.

The house was a pseudo-Gothic number on Charleville, just east of Beverly Drive. Only one car was parked anywhere on the block, a rusted green Ford, three doors down. The Bentley didn't belong. I told Bret to get lost for a while and walked up the cement squares to the front door.

Three wooden steps deposited me on a veranda just big enough to accommodate a two-seater swing. I edged around it and rang the bell.

Footsteps told me someone was home after all.

"Coming!"

The door swung back and there stood Yvette.

She was wearing a red halter top, black pedal pushers, and high black mules. The sleeves of a white sweater were tied around her shoulders. Her long brown hair was piled loosely on top of her head and secured with a barrette. It took a moment for my face to register.

"Go away," she said.

"Yvette, I need to talk to you for just a minute."

Her eyes darted past my shoulder and she shook her head. "You must go away." She licked her lips nervously. "You've no right to come here."

"Nobody knows I'm here." I hesitated. "Are you expecting Jack?"

She looked at the small gold watch on her wrist. "In about ten minutes." She frowned. "Sometimes he's late."

"Then let's go inside, Yvette. Quickly."

She pressed her lips together then shrugged. I stepped into the living room and paused. Two red satin Victorian couches faced each other in the center of the room, separated by a long low table. Benches, upholstered in plum velvet, were thrown against two of the walls. The wallpaper was a muted red print, and the lamp shades red silk. All of this was bad enough. But the ceiling was swathed in red and purple silk, which fell in long swags down the four corners of the room.

"How . . . charming. I must get the name of your decorator, Yvette."

Yvette sank onto one of the couches and pulled her knees up after her. "Jack sent someone over from the studio." She stared at me like a petulant child.

"You mean this stuff's from the prop department?"

Yvette brightened. "It's swell, isn't it?"

Hesitantly, I sat down across from her on the other bordello couch and felt like I was waiting for the next john to waltz in.

"I wanted to ask you," I began, unnerved, "about—"

"I'm not supposed to talk to you," Yvette said suddenly. "Jack told us not to."

"To me?" I asked.

"To anybody in the world," Yvette answered vaguely. "He says when you're a star everybody wants to know things and they're just being snoopy."

"Jack's right," I agreed. "How lucky you are to have him. But . . . I don't think you told me how you met."

I had been wondering about that. About Jack's selection process. Dim-witted beauties grew on trees out here. What made his girls so special? I also wondered how long he kept them.

"Through the talent program. You *know*."

"The school at MGM?"

"Uh-huh. Jack dropped in and watched me do . . . um." Yvette put her famous finger to her lip. Thinking. "A scene from *Uncle Vanya*."

Of course. How obvious. Every studio had a school. Each year a couple of dozen promising young actors and actresses were brought in and . . . schooled. In everything. How to speak, how to walk, how to dress like a star, plus lessons in voice, dance, and acting.

"And he spoke with you after?"

"He said he had never been so blinded by talent in his life."

"Er," I said. "Is that how he met the others, too? Lauralee, Anne, Kiki, and Carole? Carole what, by the way?"

"I'm not sure. She wasn't at MGM. She was at the stables."

"The stables?" I repeated blankly.

"Griffith Park. Kiki would know. They roomed together for a while. But Kiki's doing a film in New York."

She looked at her watch and sat up straight. "You've really got to go. Jack—"

Which is when, on cue, the door bell chimed.

"I knew it!" Yvette moaned.

I stood up, trying to see where I might hide. But every doorway had silk strips dangling from it.

"I'll tell him you're my neighbor," whispered Yvette, jumping up. "We'll say your name is—"

"Forget it. Where's the kitchen?"

Yvette pointed to a purple doorway as the bell chimed again. More insistently.

I hurried through the silk streamers just as I heard her say, "Hi, Jack. Oh."

Footsteps sounded in the room. "Meet Bill Waller," came Jack Seeberg's voice. "Bill, this is Miss Sands. Bill has a Cadillac dealership, honey. And he's looking for a girl just like you."

"Pleased to meet you," said Yvette, sounding disappointed or apprehensive, I couldn't tell which.

There was a loud chuckle. "Why Jack, you sly fox. How did you know this is the girl I've been searching everywhere for? God, she's perfect."

"Perfect for what?" came Yvette's hesitant voice.

"Advertisements," said Seeberg. "He's going to put you in his car ads. Your picture will be in all the newspapers in town."

"Newspapers?" said Waller. "Hell, tell her about the billboards. Twenty feet high, honey bun. You sitting on the hood of one of my cars."

"Oh," said Yvette.

"Which is why we're going to celebrate," boomed Seeberg cheerfully.

"Yes indeedeee," said Bill Waller. "Jack, you sly old fox."

"Bring out some glasses, sweetie," Seeberg said. "Hurry, while it's still cold. Then we'll get down to business."

Yvette, the dumbbell, had not thought to tell me there was a door in the kitchen, which led to a garage in the back. I had my hand on the knob when she walked in. I put my finger to my lips and waved good-bye.

Yvette Sands stood there, staring blankly at me. Then she raised a hand to her cheek and brushed away a tear.

Walter was stirring his coffee, smiling. "You're obviously onto something, kiddo. This is good."

Three o'clock on Sunday and he seemed fully sober. Possibly that horrible night at the Ambassador had brought him to his senses. Though deep down inside I knew I was kidding myself.

"I'm glad this makes you happy, Walter. Maybe next time it will be a dead dog and we can have a party." I signaled for a refill.

"Hey. I didn't say I wasn't concerned. Did I say that? But I don't think anybody's going to hurt you. Whoever it was went to some trouble to warn you. Twice. All you gotta do is be more discreet."

"How discreet can I get, marching into Seeberg's house tomorrow afternoon. 'Oh, hello, Mrs. Seeberg, don't mind me. I'm just here to find out if your husband goes around murdering people in between takes.'"

Walter nodded solemnly. "It might work, sure."

"Funny," I said.

"You want me to go with you? I can wait in the car. That is, if you're worried."

"And then come running when the gun goes off?"

"What gun? First of all, he won't be there, I wouldn't think. Second of all, even though I don't know the guy, sending a dead bird doesn't seem the kind of thing this hotshot would do."

"It doesn't?"

"It's hard to picture Lothario here running out and breaking some bird's neck, wrapping it in a pretty box and running it over to your place."

"Maybe he got Special Effects to do it," I said, not entirely joking.

"Yeah, but how does he know when to come so you're not home? So nobody's home? You mention to his wife you were working yesterday?"

"No."

"Uh-huh. Well I still like the Tooker angle. Him I can see torturing a bird. I think he done did it."

"Walter, Henry's way too boring to even have thought of it. Besides, he had the girl. Or thought he did. What would be his motive?"

"Try money. There's still that ten thousand dollars. If Seeberg did pay her off, maybe Tooker decided to help himself. Or jealousy. I always like jealousy. It often brings fatal results."

"He didn't seem like a murderer to me."

"No murderer seems like a murderer," Walter said, "until he commits a murder." He dragged a half-empty pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket, shook out two cigarettes and handed one to me. He lit them both then stuck his cigarette between his teeth. "This guy in the war?"

"He was in Europe, I think in a band."

"Guys come home from the war, they're still in the war. They can turn into psychos." Walter tapped his ash into the tray. "Like land mines waiting to be stepped on."

I tried to read his eyes but could find nothing in them. I said, "I'll look into it."

Walter sipped his coffee. "Yeah, follow it up."

"Wait a minute. How can I follow it up? I don't know where he is. Maybe the FBI will look for him, if they took me seriously. Which brings us back to Seeberg."

Walter nodded. He seemed distracted, or suddenly disinterested. Or maybe his mind had drifted back to his own war, whatever it was. I wondered if I understood what he had been telling me, that he considered himself a live land mine. Or whether I was making that up.

I said, "What an operator he is. Bringing that slimy Cadillac guy around. I'd love to see the deal *he* gets on his next car."

"You should have stuck around," Walter said. "You never know what you might have found out."

"Somehow I guessed the ending. Clever me."

"He might have said something about the Bardon girl."

"I suppose." I played with my matchbook. "But he frightens me, Walter. And he frightens them, too. Why shouldn't he kill Anne Bardon, if he thought she was going to upset his perfect little world?"

"Anything's possible." Walter pulled out his wallet but didn't open it. He laid it on the counter. "See if you can find out what the wife knows about the hanky-panky. Wives always know about their husband's digressions."

"Digressions? You call keeping five women and maybe murdering one of them a digression?"

"Meantime, I'll put another Tooker bee in the FBI's bonnet. I don't like the way he vamoosed. If he did vamoose."

"Do you think I should notify Sergeant Beame? About the bird, I mean."

"That's a swell idea."

"Actually, I wonder what's happened to him. He's kind of disappeared."

"They're all working on the Dahlia case. All the local police departments. It's a bad time to get bumped off by your garden-variety killer. Nobody's going to care."

"So what about Tooker?"

"You should call his house from time to time, or drop by, see if he's around. And check with Mocambo. Actually, you might check with some of the other clubs. If he's in town, he's probably working somewhere."

"Well I better get back. Will you do me a favor? Just keep in touch, Walter. You know, call me."

"Of course, kid. Here, I'll get the coffees. You might want to make sure there's always someone at your house, though. And keep the doors locked. Don't go anywhere without Boy Driver."

"He's going to be making a movie next week." I gave Walter a jaunty look. "Want to drive me to work?"

Walter was up, heading for the door. "Use the bus. They say it cuts down on the smog problem. The mayor will adore you. The city of Los Angeles will honor you."

He gave me a sweeping bow as he opened the door, ushering me through. "Get yourself some schedules, plenty of dimes."

I stepped out onto the pavement, ignoring him.

"Not even a murderer is going to put up with the city bus system," Walter said. "Believe me."

Two cars were parked in the driveway when Bret brought me home, six-thirty or so. One was the green MG, top down, belonging to Nick. The other was the low-slung black coupe driven by Theodora Jones. The occupants were sitting on the front steps waiting for me, which meant Mrs. Keyes still had not returned.

I opened the front door and let them in.

We stood in the hall and looked at each other; Nick wearing a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt, Tee, her thick red hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing her version of the same thing. Maybe that was why I had problems with Nick. I never called to wardrobe-coordinate.

We all spoke at once.

Nick saying, "Are you okay?"

Tee saying, "What do you have to eat?"

Me saying, "Why if it isn't the Bobbsey Twins."

Which Tee didn't like.

She made a face. "We been riding horses all afternoon. I'm beat."

"Let's go into the kitchen," said Nick. "That was, I believe, the scene of the crime."

We all trooped down the hall. Tee immediately pulled open the refrigerator door and peered inside. I came up behind her, saying, "Mrs. Keyes left some fried chicken. In a big foil thing, ah . . ."

"Here it is," sang Tee, seizing the foil packet. I took it from her and told her to sit down. Instead, she went back to the refrigerator and shook out three Cokes, carrying them to the table. After I located the potato salad, we sat down and began to eat.

Or they did. I sipped my Coke and went through the bird story for Tee's benefit. I tagged on the part about the first message, the one left in the mailbox, for both their benefits. "Walter says I'm okay," I finished. "He says whoever it was wanted to warn me and wouldn't actually hurt me."

"Not yet anyway," said Tee, gnawing on a leg, a few crumbs sticking to her mouth. "But I don't think this person is playing games. He means business."

"Walter," said Nick. "What does *he* know?"

"And I don't like the way he knew when no one was home," Tee continued. "Is it possible somebody's been following you?"

I said I didn't think so, but sure, it was possible.

"Let me see the card that came with the bird and the note you found in your mailbox." Tee wiped her mouth with a paper napkin and pushed her plate away.

I went to the hall table where the phone was. I had put both notes in the drawer there. In the kitchen, Tee held the card by the edges, studying it. Then she glanced at the letter. "I'll take these downtown, see if I can get someone to check them for prints." She looked up and smiled. "Meantime, I think I'll trail you the next couple days. See if anyone is following."

I shook my head. "Thanks, Tee. But really, I'll be fine."

She got up and walked out. I heard the front door open and close.

"Where's she going?" I said to Nick.

"To get her bag." Nick ran a fingernail between his two front teeth, trying to pry something out. "We decided she should stay here with you. In case the guy comes back."

"Honestly, I don't need a bodyguard. Tell her she can't."

I heard the front door opening and shutting, boots click-clacking along the hallway.

Nick was running his thumbnail between his teeth again, saying, "You got any toothpicks, Paris?"

24

". . . Helen Trent, who, when life mocks her, breaks her hopes, dashes her against the rocks of despair, fights back bravely, successfully, to prove what so many women long to prove in their own lives: that because a woman is thirty-five, and more, romance in life need not be over; that the romance of youth . . ."

Mrs. Keyes was bent over the kitchen counter, ear glued to the radio, when I came stealing downstairs the next morning, eight o'clock, fully dressed. Monday and Tuesday were my days off, and there was nowhere I had to be at this hour. But I did not intend to sit around the house under the protective watch of Theodora Jones, asleep upstairs in the guest room. What I did intend to do was make a housebreak.

". . . Glamorous Helen Trent faces a desperate crisis in her deep love for the brilliant, handsome lawyer Gil Whitney . . ."

"Good morning," I said, startling my housekeeper, who made an involuntary jump away from the counter. "Coffee ready?"

"Oh, my goodness, you scared me to death," she exclaimed, clutching the front of a navy wool robe that looked suspiciously like one I had misplaced sometime ago. "What are you doing up so early?"

"New leaf," I said cheerfully. "Why don't you hop into some clothes. I need to get downtown right away."

Mrs. Keyes gave me one of her woe-is-me looks, sighed heavily and padded into her room, which was just off the kitchen.

When she had returned the night before, I had told her nothing of the dead bird, not wanting to deal with the tizzy she would surely fall into. Tee, I had explained, was a friend of Nick's who would be staying with us for a few days. Which raised one of her eyebrows but produced no comment.

I turned up the radio and stood at the counter flipping through the paper, sipping coffee and munching Salerno butter cookies until Mrs. Keyes emerged wearing a housedress and a worn gray cardigan. A scarf hid her perm-frizzy hair, except for a few stray wisps sticking out at electrified angles. Whenever she felt put-upon she made a point of dressing like Cinderella.

"Will your houseguest be wantin' breakfast?" asked Mrs. Keyes, glaring at the Salernos.

"I wouldn't know her habits," I replied. "But she seems to know how to open the fridge."

Outside the *Examiner* the derelicts were mistakenly milling about as usual, as Mrs. Keyes slammed to a stop at the curb, propelling the right-front tire onto the sidewalk, prompting a curiously raised eyebrow or two. "And remember to keep the doors locked," I said, adjusting my hat, which had slipped over one eye when we jolted to a stop. "There were a couple of robberies in Beverly over the weekend so we might as well take precautions, okay?"

She said okay.

"And one other thing. Tee Jones is a nice girl, so please be helpful to her."

She said of course she would be.

"Just don't tell her where I am."

"You mean that I drove you down here?" She stared at the sidewalk frowning. "I wouldn't tell anybody I took you here. Who are these people?"

I glanced at the scraggly men shuffling about in line. Their faces were the black and white portraits of despair that you found in *Life* magazine.

I said, "She wants to hang around with me, but I have work to do. You can tell her I'll be home for dinner though, if she asks."

Society was deserted. I flipped on the lights and sat down and wondered how to kill seven hours. I began by taking out a brand-new notebook from my desk drawer and carefully printing some questions to ask Mrs. Seeberg. But after listing nine, I tossed down my pencil in disgust. Walter was right. It was her husband I had to get to.

I picked up the phone and dialed Henry Tooker's number. I listened awhile and hung up. It was too early to phone Mocambo. I started working on a rose garden, choosing carmine red, while I thought some more.

. . . how to approach Seeberg? Using what ruse, what dialogue. I couldn't think. Was it because I was scared? Yes, that was it. I couldn't think because I was scared of him. So I had to find an oblique angle, come at him indirectly.

I grew bored with red and switched to pink. Nick Goodwin. He wanted me to find out about the card-cheating scandal, a subject I intended to take up with Tee that night. Actually, I had intended to take it up with her the night before, but at seven o'clock she had excused herself, gone upstairs to shower, then left the house for the game itself. I was asleep before she returned.

The pink crayon snapped in two. I tossed it into the metal wastebasket and picked up lemon yellow. At which point the two trains suddenly collided.

Ted Stein. A boy I had known in high school, sort of even dated, until the night I stood him up for senior prom. I hadn't run into him in years, but I had seen him quoted in the papers from time to time as a deputy district attorney for L.A. County.

I walked into the newsroom, asking Jo to get Ted on the line for me. Then I went back to my desk. A minute later my phone rang.

"I don't know if you remember me . . . Paris Masterson?"

"Masterson? Wait—let me think. Masterson. Icy blonde, stuck up, always in the principal's office, and was the first girl I ever heard swear. Am I in the neighborhood? Let's see, started a fire in the oven during Home Ec., was voted the class tease, wanted to be *velly* alone her senior year à la Garbo, and whom *I* thought was as beautiful as Garbo. How am I doing?"

"Your memory is unreliable," I said. "Betsy Bloome swore first."

"That's what a broken heart will do—I've lionized you."

"And now the lioness returns because she needs something. I suppose she hasn't changed at all."

"I hope not. What do you need?"

I looked up at the clock. "How would you like to have a cup of coffee with me? I could be at your office in ten minutes."

"That urgent? You better make it a half hour. There's a coffee shop across the street called Weston's."

I got off the streetcar at Broadway and Temple at the Hall of Justice and found the coffee shop halfway down the Temple block.

The two men sitting at the counter were not Ted, so I slid into a booth and lit a cigarette. A few minutes later he came in, the older brother of the boy I once knew. Eleven years had put the right amount of weight on him, filling out his face and giving his wiry body some bulk. His brown hair was parted on the side and slicked back and he now wore horn-rimmed glasses, very distinguished. Double-breasted tweed suit and a white shirt. Quite an attractive man after all.

He sat down across from me. After a moment, he smiled. "Your eyes are different but the rest is the same."

"Your eyes are the same, but the rest is different. I'm intrigued."

"Don't be. It's the same basic furniture with new upholstery. Let's get some coffee and talk. I don't have much time."

I told Ted about my job at the *Examiner*, working for Etta Rice. I said that I had heard the D.A.'s office was looking into possible cheating at Gardiner Folkes's poker games and I wanted to know if this were true.

Ted stirred his coffee. "I don't know. But what if I did? Let's establish some ground rules here."

"I wouldn't write about it, I just want to know. As much as you can tell me."

"Why?"

"I want to be informed. These are Etta's people we're talking about."

"You know I'm not allowed to tell. If something is going on, there could be a grand-jury investigation."

"Nobody will ever know you told. I promise."

"Uh-huh," said Ted, sipping his coffee. "And what else?"

I smiled. "If the D.A. is investigating, he'll have a list of the players. If a certain person's name is on that list, I will use the game as an excuse to approach him. But what I want to see him about is something else entirely. I need the excuse."

Ted looked at me, small smile, not saying anything.

I asked, "Are you unsure whether you can trust me?"

"I trust your intentions, Paris. I'm just not convinced you know what you're doing. So look, here's what I'll do. I'll find out what I can find out. But nothing goes into the paper, or into another reporter's ear. You even find yourself tempted, you call me first. I'm not fooling around here."

"Understood. Agreed."

He glanced at his watch. "I've got to run I'm afraid. I wish we had more time. Perhaps . . ." he reached for the check, "we'll have dinner one night."

"Mm." The confidence, that was different, too. I said, "Let's put that idea on hold, Ted. I wouldn't want to act stupid with you again, and right now I'm acting stupid with men."

"You're behaving stupidly is what you mean. I would have thought you would have improved by now."

"With men?"

"With grammar. The point is, you've got to give it time, Paris."

"My grammar?" I said playfully.

"Men. He not only betrayed you by dying, he died a silly and unnecessary death. But one of the great things about

Russell was that wonderful recklessness. I don't think you should be angry with him over that."

Ted reached into his pocket and brought up a handful of change. He picked out a quarter and tossed it down. My mouth felt suddenly dry. "You knew him?" I stammered.

"Sure. L.A. Tennis Club." He grinned. "When I found out he was dating you, that's when I began to beat him."

My words got caught somewhere in my throat.

"I was already at Fort Bragg when you got married. I told him I couldn't get a leave."

I glanced away, but it didn't work. Suddenly, humiliatingly, I began to cry.

Ted took my hand and held it. "I'm not in love with you anymore, Paris. If you need me, you should call."

When I got back to the paper, Tee was sitting at Nick's desk, deep in conversation with Constance McPhee Estevez. That is, she was sitting in Nick's chair, her feet were on the desk. She was wearing black wool slacks, a black turtleneck sweater and the killer, a man's homburg, also black, from under which cascaded her long red hair.

Tee was saying to Constance in her throaty southern drawl, "I could tell you stories about Chief Horrall make your hair stand on end. And I could tell you stories he tol' me about some of Hollywood's leading men, things you wouldn't believe."

She grinned. "Oh, hi, Paris. You should've banged on my door. Gettin' up early is something I never got the hang of."

I nodded pleasantly, saying, "Don't let me interrupt your conversation. I've got to call someone." Thinking I might kill Mrs. Keyes.

"Yeah, your housekeeper didn't know where you'd gone off to, so I just took a chance and came here," Tee said.

I smiled as I reached for the phone. Thinking, all right, I wouldn't kill Mrs. Keyes. I dialed Henry Tooker's number and let it ring for a long time. Tee was still talking to Constance. I picked up my purse and wandered into the city room, found a phone that wasn't being used, and began calling round to the nightclubs. At this hour, only the managers had come in, the men in charge of food and drinks. But most were able to help me. Henry Tooker was not currently working at any of the big-name clubs. I asked the managers to please call me if Henry showed up. Next I phoned the stables at Griffith Park and asked to speak with the riding director. A Thomas O'Grady came on the line.

I told him my name and said a friend had recommended a riding instructor named Carole, did he know who I meant?

"Sure. Carole Hanks. But you won't find her here, ma'am. She quit."

"Do you know where she went?"

"I haven't a clue, Miss Chandler. She just walked into my office one morning and said she was leaving town, something had come up, and could she have her paycheck? I was under the impression she was going away for the weekend. But she never came back."

"How long ago was that?"

"Oh, about two weeks I would guess. She's a nice girl, too. Good with people, better with horses."

"Yes," I said. "That's what I'd heard. She must have been with you a long time."

"Two years. Which is a long time in this racket. But look, I got a couple other kids here could teach you to ride."

"Maybe I'll come by sometime, Mr. O'Grady. But I was wondering if you had a number for Carole, or an address. I'm planning an outing for a group of people, an all-day ride, and I'd still like to try to reach her."

"Hang on, lemme look in my book." There was a considerable shuffling of papers followed by, "Here we go, 705 San Vicente, apartment three. That's Santa Monica. Phone is Exbrook 6-7027. You get a hold a'her, ask her to call. Tell her we'd like to have her back."

I said I would, thanked him for his help and hung up.

I dialed the number he gave me. The operator broke in saying the line was no longer in service. I looked at the clock. It was twelve-fifteen.

I knew it had been too easy.

25

Seven-oh-five San Vicente was a two-story wooden apartment house on the south side of the boulevard, painted canary yellow. A sign on the front lawn said NO VACANCIES. The door was unlocked. It opened into a tiny vestibule scented with furniture polish. Apartment 1 was on the left, apartment 2 on the right. Straight ahead was a staircase. To the right of it, beneath a mirror, a scratched wooden table held the morning mail. I shuffled through it. An M. D. Carter seemed to be the current occupant of apartment 3. There were no letters for Carole Hanks.

I followed a worn brown runner up to the second floor and knocked on the door marked 3. After a moment, the door across the way flew open.

"He ain't in."

A middle-aged woman snapping her gum leaned against the doorframe defiantly. She was dressed to the nines for the wrong time of the day, at least according to my clock. Her red silk robe fell open to reveal a short black nightie. Her ash-blond hair had been swept up into an elaborate hairpin concoction; long rhinestone earrings dangled from her lobes. All of the makeup was there, from the black mascara to the caked ruby lips. Matching red toenails poked out of high-heeled satin slippers.

I said, "He?"

"Why, you know something I don't?"

"I was looking for Carol Hanks."

"Then you got the wrong place, honey."

"Do you know where she went?"

"Should I?"

"How about when *he* gets home."

"Max don't know neither. Anything else I can help you with?"

I said, "You've been too generous as it is."

Downstairs, no one was home in either apartment. I tore out a sheet of paper from my notebook and wrote a message to Max asking him to call me if he had a forwarding address for Carole Hanks. Then I slipped off my shoes and crept up the stairs. I shoved the note under his door and vacated the premises.

I had covered maybe a block of San Vicente when I had a thought. I went back to 705, sat down on the front stoop and opened the dog-eared issue of *Movieland* I had found on the bus. I turned to "And She Can Cook, Too!" a scintillating article on Esther Williams's eating habits. It was another warm, cloudless day, with just the right amount of breeze coming off the ocean seven blocks away. I removed my jacket, flipped on my sunglasses and waited.

Forty minutes later, the mailman wheeled his cart up the walk. He was young and tan. I suspected that underneath the uniform, a surfer was itching to break out. "Hullo," he said cheerfully.

I smiled. "You must be new."

"Yes, ma'am. They changed my route two weeks ago."

I was in luck. "My name is Carole Hanks," I said. "I moved a few weeks back, and even though I left a forwarding address, I'm not sure my mail is being forwarded."

He tipped his cap back on his head. "Gee, that's funny. They're supposed to catch the letters at the post office and reroute them. A couple that slipped through I took back and turned in personally. Only thing I can think of, maybe the morning mailman didn't forward your letters."

"Or maybe they've got the address wrong. How can I check?"

He grinned. "Bakersfield, right? Rural route something."

I slipped on my shoes and stood up. "I was hoping you'd say that," I said.

At three-thirty, Mrs. Keyes made an extraordinary left-hand turn from San Vicente onto Ocean Avenue and came to a screeching stop next to the sidewalk where I was standing. I got in the car, gave her directions to the Seeberg house and spread the *Movieland* open in my lap. The words jiggled violently all the way to Bel Air. But it was better than watching the road.

We turned off Sunset and entered Bel Air through the

Bellagio Road gate. I was never sure if the stone-gated entrances to the neighborhood had been installed to keep the riffraff from coming in or the money from leaking out. In Beverly Hills, a sort of Ellis Island for the newly arrived rich, people lived in expensive houses separated by narrow ribbons of lawn. In Bel Air, people lived in national parks with estates on them.

The address on Chalon Road was at the top of a long, winding drive. When I got out of the car I could command a view of the city that ran from the towering twelve-story buildings downtown all the way west across the flat L.A. basin to the beach. Everything had a shimmer to it. Either there was no smog today, or the residents had outlawed it from their view. I gazed at the house, a gray stone affair with wings and turrets that stretched from here to eternity. It was the kind of place you could spend a week and never run into anybody you knew.

I rang the door bell.

The two-tone chime suggested Baccarat crystal. After a moment the enormous castlelike door swung back to reveal a squat Mexican woman in a black uniform. I decided her figure was proportionally too short for the work of art she was featured in. She held a silver candlestick in one hand, a cloth in the other, and looked frankly annoyed at the interruption. She gave me a blank stare to let me know I was going to have to do all of the work.

"I'm here to see Mrs. Seeberg," I finally said.

"How you call yourself?"

"Charming," I said.

She stepped aside to let me enter. "One momento." She backed away and turned, then walked serenely down a baronial hall to heaven knows where. I was standing on gray marble and staring up at a paler gray wall that could have been transported to any reputable art museum in the country. I had passed a Picasso, a small Degas, and a well-known Van Gogh, and was en route to a major Monet when I was summoned by the same Mexican. Either Mrs. Seeberg knew a Miss Charming or figured it was close enough to Chandler to risk letting me enter.

At the end of the hall we turned right into what may have been a living room, a tapestried and Persian rug jungle cluttered with too much heavy old world furniture. We went through a pair of French doors and stepped out onto a gray flagstone patio. No one was there. The maid continued along a stone walk that disappeared into a hedge-bordered maze. After a number of confusing zigs and zags we finally stepped out onto a broad sloping lawn, at the bottom of which lay a swimming pool.

Helen Seeberg was sitting at a round table under a yellow-and-white-striped umbrella, being tended to by a man in a white jacket. It struck me that whatever this scene cost in dollars and cents, it had to have come out of her piggy bank. And the pennies, despite the protective stone gates, had leaked out anyway and rolled merrily along into the grasping hands of Seeberg's harem. It was the kind of deceit Hollywood did best: He playing the devoted husband while lavishing her money on his bedbugs; the bedbugs taking the gifts as living proof that their long-held dreams of fame and fortune had come true. It was a conceit as phony as the scenes in movies they would never get to play. Of all his directorial credits, this fiction had to stand as Seeberg's most impressive work.

She was wearing white wool slacks and a white V-neck sweater. Although the January sun was already low in the sky, she continued to wear a pair of dark round sunglasses. Her left hand, resting on the table, surrounded a highball glass possessively. Her right hand flew up and waved to me.

"Come join me, Paris, we'll have a cocktail."

The man in the jacket pulled out a chair cushioned with yellow-and-white-striped pillows and asked me what I would have. I looked at Mrs. Seeberg, who said, "This is scotch. We have everything." She said it as if I might phone the paper and report, "The Seebergs only had scotch."

"I'll have a Manhattan, please."

"And I'll have another scotch. And some cheese, Chester. Ask Carlotta to give you the Brie." Mrs. Seeberg turned to me. "The Worthingtons brought us some direct from Paris. There's only a small sliver left."

She brought her glass to her lips, then hesitated. "We used to go all the time, before the war. But now . . ." She tabled the rest of the sentence in favor of a healthy swig of scotch.

"Yes?" I prompted.

"We always stayed at the Ritz."

"Perhaps you'll go again soon," I offered encouragingly.

Mrs. Seeberg arched an eyebrow at me. "Only if my husband's movie work takes him there. You'd think he . . . actually needed the money."

I nodded. "Men are like that, I think. The ones who are successful never know when to stop. Those who should work harder find every reason not to."

"Yes, I suppose," she said, sounding unconvinced.

"But you must be proud of him," I prodded. "Aren't you?"

"Jack is an amazing man." She smiled then. A pretty smile. It made her look young and innocent. Until she tipped her glass back and swallowed thirstily.

I caught a glimpse of Chester coming across the lawn.

"He still cooks breakfast on Sundays and brings me up a tray," said Mrs. Seeberg suddenly. "Busy as he is."

A polished silver tray with Brie and crackers floated onto the table. Next came a white paper cocktail napkin engraved with a navy S, followed by my drink. Chester walked around the table and presented Mrs. Seeberg with a second drink. Then he stole away.

I said, "But surely you must keep very busy running your magnificent home." I sipped the Manhattan. It was perfect.

"Yes," said Mrs. Seeberg sarcastically. "Spending money is a full-time job." The glass she held was down to its ice cubes. She set it aside and reached for glass number two. I wondered how many others she had already gone through.

I opened my bag and pulled out the notebook and a fountain pen. "Did you expect a different kind of life?"

"No. Just a different kind of husband."

"Is it his work you mean?"

"In part." Mrs. Seeberg seemed to become aware of my notebook. "Is this what we're supposed to be talking about?" she asked sharply.

I put down my pen and smiled sheepishly. "Please, I don't mean to pry. The reason I'm doing this piece is because many women like yourself feel some frustration with their lives. We all read about the husbands' successes. But someone is paying a price."

Helen Seeberg stared at me and I wondered for a moment if she were going to have me thrown out. Then she turned away, her dark glasses facing to the easternmost reaches of her property, where a stand of Italian cypress rose up like paid sentinels watching over her empire. "And what would you know about frustration?" she said archly.

"I've lived with a frustrated woman all my life, Mrs. Seeberg."

The glasses swung back. "My dear, what are you talking about? Your mother is a lovely person, and quite content I'm sure. After all, she has you."

"Thanks," I said in surprise. Then it occurred to me what she was saying. I said, "Oh."

She said, "Yes. 'Oh.'" She turned away again. "When I married Jack I expected him to father my children. Speaking of expectations."

"And Mr. Seeberg didn't want . . . ?"

"Mr. Seeberg couldn't have."

She brought her arms around and hugged her elbows as if comforting herself in a moment of tragedy.

"It's getting chilly," she whispered. "Shall we go inside?"

She led me around the western wing of the main house to a small guest house that lay just beyond. Entering, I was surprised to discover a light, airy studio clearly meant for an artist. Two of the walls had been knocked out and replaced with glass. The other walls were painted white, the same white as the tile on the floor. There was a large drafting table, two small metal chests with narrow drawers, three easels, and an old sofa at one end of the room. Also a coffee table with a telephone on it. Propped up against one of the walls was an untidy array of painted canvases, pictures that Mrs. Seeberg had chosen not to hang. The walls were bare.

So were two of the easels. I walked over to the third and studied the painting. It was an oil of a woman on a horse. The woman wore jodphurs and a dark green sweater, and from the positioning of the horse's legs, it appeared the animal was getting ready to jump but something up ahead had clearly frightened the woman. Her face was contorted; her mouth open as if she were about to scream. It was a very disturbing picture.

I turned. Mrs. Seeberg was standing a few feet behind me, monitoring my reaction. "It's just a hobby. I'm not very good."

"No, your technique is quite good," I said. "What has frightened the woman so?"

She gave me a small smile and turned away. "Please sit down, Paris." She headed for a glass cart trimmed in brass and poured herself a scotch from a cut-glass decanter. She took the top off a silver ice bucket and dropped two cubes into her glass. I wondered if someone was in charge of keeping the bucket stocked at all times. Or just after four.

She turned. "How about switching to scotch?"

"Sure," I said, determined to keep her going, even at the cost of drinking scotch, which I disliked.

She joined me on the couch. "So far I haven't been of help. I'm still not sure what you're looking for."

I did. I said, "You came to my parents' house alone Friday night. Does that happen often?"

"Usually I don't plan much when Jack's shooting a film. But lately he's been working like a madman. They want this project done quickly, and there's been casting problems, among other things."

"Casting problems?"

"The girl who was supposed to play the third lead was, uh, murdered."

The word murdered came out almost soundlessly, as if Mrs. Seeberg found such language unseemly in polite company.

"Murdered?" I repeated. "Who?"

"An Anne Bardon, I believe her name was. But this is hardly pertinent to your story."

"Right." I took a small sip of the scotch. "Perhaps you would show me some of your paintings. I'd really like to see them."

Mrs. Seeberg shrugged, as if this would bore her, but she rose and walked carefully across the room to the canvases leaning against the wall. I followed her and stood a polite distance behind as she bent over and began sorting through them.

"Here's one," she said, straightening. She tilted her head, studying a small oil before turning round to show me.

The painting depicted a grassy yard, a row of hedges in the back. In the lower-right corner a black spaniel was walking, head down, toward the edge of the canvas. In the upper-left corner were three tiny puddles of red.

I looked again at the dog. There was no red on its mouth.

"I see you like painting animals," I offered. "What did the dog just kill?"

"Whatever you want to think," Mrs. Seeberg said. "Or maybe the dog didn't kill anything."

She put down the painting and began picking through the others. A soft tapping at the studio door made her pause. "Come in," she called.

The Mexican stood tentatively in the doorway. "Ma'am, the man, he finish with the stove."

"So?" said Mrs. Seeberg standing straight.

"He say he want to see you." She shifted her feet.

"I'm busy, can't you see? Tell him to call me."

The maid stared at Mrs. Seeberg for a long moment, showing nothing. "He want to be paid, Meesus Seeberg."

"Have him send me a bill," Mrs. Seeberg said crossly. "You know not to disturb me when I'm in my studio."

"I'm not in a hurry," I interjected. "I don't mind waiting at all."

Mrs. Seeberg spun around and flashed angry eyes at me. Then, as if catching herself, her face softened. "I'll be right back," she said quickly.

I waited until I heard the footsteps fade away before I walked over to her drafting table. She may have done sketches on it, but it seemed also to serve as her desk. I sat down on the high stool and began thumbing through a pile of party invitations. Another pile was bills. Under them, I found a brown leather appointment calendar. I flipped it open. In ink, she had written down doctors' appointments, lunch dates, charity meetings, and social engagements. My eye went first to Tuesday, January 7, the night Anne Bardon was killed.

A name was scribbled in blue ink. I had trouble reading her messy scrawl but it looked like "Davises—7 o'clock." Nothing was written in for the following Tuesday evening, the night Elizabeth Short was butchered to death.

I closed the book and returned to the paintings. Every single one of those I looked at contained an element of disquiet. In a routine still life, a basket of bright flowers was dominated by a black rose. My eye fell on a canvas that showed a woman wearing an apron in a kitchen. She was standing over a counter gazing serenely at a loaf of bread, knife in hand, looking as if she were about to slice it. The knife had blood on it.

The door opened. "Sorry, Paris," Mrs. Seeberg said, coming into the studio and smiling. The door closed. She was still holding her glass. She held it up. "More?"

"Not yet, thank you." I set the kitchen canvas carefully on the floor and walked over to the couch. She was watching me. Her eyes had taken on that bright hard shine that comes with a certain intake of alcohol. As she moved, even more carefully now, across the room for a refill, I decided that scotch was probably her dearest and closest companion.

Her back was to me as I said, "One of the ladies I interviewed for this story told me something in the strictest confidence. The hardest part about being married to a director, she said, was overcoming her own feelings of jealousy. Frankly . . . I was on a lot the other day . . . I mean, well, you must have an awfully good marriage."

For a moment she stood perfectly still, as if she had been caught in a little white lie. When she finally turned, her face was a blank. She blinked her eyes. "Excuse me? I'm sorry, dear. What did you mean?"

"Starlets," I said.

"Oh." She nodded. "Then you know."

I put my glass down on the coffee table a little too hard.

"I'm surprised because Jack goes to such lengths to keep his work with those girls quiet," Mrs. Seeberg said impassively. "I doubt another director in Hollywood has done more to help actresses get their start." She smiled warmly and drifted back to the couch. I could smell the liquor on her breath as soon as she sat down.

She giggled. "It's nice having you here, Paris."

"Thank you," I said guardedly. "Uh, Mrs. Seeberg . . ."

"Oh please stop Mrs. Seeberging me. I'm Helen."

"Helen." I grinned. "You must be an amazing woman, Helen. No, really, I mean that. I have to confess, if it were my husband, I know I'd get jealous. At least occasionally."

Again she giggled. Or maybe the alcohol did. "The way I see it," she said conspiratorially, "after being around all those silly little girls all day, he's absolutely delighted to come home to a real woman." She winked.

Oh boy, I thought. I thought, was she pulling my leg or had she actually convinced herself to believe that?

She tapped my knee. "I'll tell you something, Paris, that just occurred to me. Instead of writing about me, why don't you write about Jack? Maybe you can get him to talk about how he finds these girls and coaches them. That's the real story," Helen Seeberg said thickly. "If you ask me."

I left the house in a snit.

That was the story all right, Jack and his girls. As I walked along the circular drive, I began to wonder if she had been setting me up all along, knowing that if I were to attempt such an article, I would make a laughingstock out of her husband. Or if her last remark had been sheer whimsy, as vaporous as the fumes from her scotch. No matter. I was steamed. And when I got to the end of the circular drive and saw thin air where Mrs. Keyes was supposed to be, I began to mutter out loud.

Just then, I heard the sound of a car approaching. I waited. The car was coming fast. After a moment, its grill flashed into view in the fading light, its tires kicking up dust from the gravel. It slammed to a stop alongside me. The driver leaned across the seat and threw open the passenger door.

"So how did it go?" Tee said.

26

I refused to tell Tee what Helen Seeberg had said, citing privileged information, which caused her to raise an eyebrow as she blasted along Sunset in her souped-up coupe. What I did say, peevishly, was, "I don't like this."

To which she drawled, "This? Or me?"

"The whole thing. I don't want a bodyguard. I don't like someone snooping around—me, my house or my place of work. I—"

Tee held up a hand. "What you need, Paris, is a hot bath, a drink, and whatever it is your housekeeper is throwing into that pot. We'll talk after dinner."

I told her I couldn't wait.

When I walked into the house I immediately saw the large manila envelope jutting out of the vertical mahogany mail holder that hung on the wall above the phone table. I carried the envelope upstairs and tossed it onto the dresser. Then I went into the bathroom and turned on the water in the tub. I came back into the bedroom and opened the sealed envelope. The scrawled note on top said: "This didn't come from me, but I hope it helps you. And I hope to see you again. Regards, the Prom King."

The typewritten sheet clipped to the note contained a list, single-spaced, of twenty-three men who were known to play poker at Gardiner Folkes's house, one of which was identified as T. Jones. Beside many of the names was a figure with either a plus or a minus sign, denoting how much the player was ahead or in the hole. I was impressed with the thoroughness of the information.

When I got to the eleventh name on the list, I did a double-take. Then I just sat there, staring at it.

I don't know how long I sat. Eventually, the sound of the bathwater registered. I got up off the bed and went in and turned it off.

Clutching the paper, I steamed downstairs.

Tee was sitting in the red leather chair, feet up on the ottoman, reading the new *Life* magazine. "The Gypsy" by the Ink Spots was playing on my phonograph.

I closed the door behind me. "We'd better talk now," I said.

". . . A reasonable balance of work and play keeps you healthy, wealthy, and wise."

27

Theodora Jones had ridden into town on the *Southern Crescent* from New Orleans in December 1939. She carried a cardboard suitcase that contained a few clothes, though not the type often seen on the better streets of Los Angeles. She also had one thousand dollars, which she had taken off several of her traveling companions in a marathon poker game played out over the three-day trip. She was eighteen.

And on the lam.

Her mother, according to Tee, ran one of the better brothels in the French Quarter; her father was unknown. At twelve, Tee was initiated into "the life," as she put it, and by age sixteen had blossomed into the star attraction of her mother's establishment, or so she said.

Two years later, she was attacked on the street by a pair of drunken Marines. The resulting altercation left one dead of a stab wound. Tee contends it was the second Marine who inflicted the wound. Nevertheless, she thought it advisable "to make tracks," she said.

Working the streets of downtown L.A., that first winter, she soon came to the attention of Nicky del Gennio, a low-level hood in the Marciano organization, which, at the time, controlled most of the city's gambling, prostitution, and black-market activities.

Tee was put to work in one of the Marciano houses and in no time was attracting a higher class of clientele. By 1944, she was running her own house for Marciano, a mansion in the hills above Sunset Strip. To this establishment came L.A.'s finest: top-ranking military officers, politicians, mobsters, society leaders, and, of course, movie people.

"I did my darnedest to run it like my mama's place," she reminisced. "I got the best jazz musicians on the West Coast and they'd gather for late-night jam sessions. And I made sure the girls were not only clean and attractive, but well-spoken. You know, able to keep up the level of conversation."

Tee was a shrewd businesswoman in the sense of knowing how to market her product, so to speak, and she practiced discretion. Despite the sensitive information to which she was privy, she was smart enough to keep her mouth shut and not use that information for personal gain. Business boomed.

In time, Tee found herself involved, personally and professionally, with Lt. Barney Feldman, the LAPD vice-squad officer to whom she made weekly payoffs. Fortyish and a bachelor, Feldman became Tee's companion on her days off, her sometimes lover and occasional establishment bouncer.

At the end of the war, Feldman and Tee talked idly about starting new lives. For Feldman this prospect came sooner than expected when, late one night, a dope peddler he had put away, broke out of jail and sent a flurry of bullets through his living room window. Two lodged in his neck; one pierced his left lung, missing his heart by an eyelash. He recovered and retired from the force with full pension. Tee retired, too. Using her savings, she bought her freedom from the cash-poor Marciano family, with the proviso she never open a competing establishment. Then she and Feldman rented a house in West Hollywood, ready to enjoy a life of leisure.

It lasted a month.

Bored by inactivity, Feldman began hanging around Central Station in the afternoons. When a bail bondsman offered him commission work as a skip tracer, he jumped at the chance. Tee, having pictured herself puttering around in the garden and maybe taking up drawing, realized very quickly that she needed action. She started going along with Feldman for the ride.

She was a natural. Years of experience had taught her how to read a man like a neon sign, and exactly what to say to win his confidence, get him to talk. It was Feldman's idea to open their office: Barney Feldman Investigations.

"Then we had a falling out, of love and of business," Tee said.

"You were too sharp for him," I ventured.

"Actually, I think it had more to do with a lifelong habit of thirty-minute relationships." She lifted her bottle and swallowed.

I was working on sherry. We both sat there holding our drinks, saying nothing. Finally I got up and dug out Billie Holiday's "Sophisticated Lady" from the cabinet. Put it on and sat back down.

Tee said, "And in answer to your next question, that's why the FBI called me in the other day. They thought I might know something about Elizabeth Short, which I did. She worked for me for a couple of months."

"That wasn't my next question," I said irritably.

"Sorry."

I inadvertently glanced at the sheet of paper from Ted, lying heavily on the couch beside me. I looked at Tee. "So one of your friends in the D.A.'s office, maybe someone you owed from the old days, asked you to infiltrate the card game . . . that was my next question."

"I never owed anybody anything." Sounding huffy. "Otherwise you're right. We used to keep a game going at the house on weekends. The D.A. was a regular. Took some money offa him, too." She grinned.

"And you compiled this list?" I pointed to the paper, which I had showed Tee earlier.

"Yep."

I put down my drink. "But how? The players, okay. You counted noses. But the money, how could you have gotten all these amounts?"

"For Chrissake, Paris." Tee got up and went out of the room. After a while, she came back holding another bottle of beer. Her third, if I had counted correctly. She wiped off the mouth before sitting down.

"Mrs. Keyes is fuming in there. Wants to know when we're going to eat."

"Soon," I said. I listened to Billie for a minute. "How?"

"You're asking me how? You slay me, Paris, really. How do you think how? I mean *how* do you get information? You get men to tell you things. Heck, I been getting men to tell me things all my life. More than I want to know, believe me."

I laughed. "Okay. But how did the D.A. know to investigate in the first place, who told?"

Tee nodded in the direction of the piece of paper. "It's right there on the list."

"Did the D.A. tell you the name of this informant when he called you in?"

"Nope. The D.A. got a letter, anonymous. Listed some accusations, nothing substantial. Could have been the ravings of a red-sore loser." She put down her bottle. It was half empty. "Only reason he got interested, the D.A., is that he despises a couple of the players. Big shots who wouldn't contribute to his election campaigns. He thought if there was anything to the accusations, maybe he could get even."

"Aren't the Feds supposed to be handling something like this?"

"They already are. When the D.A. realized there really was cheating going on, he called in the FBI. They still don't know how it's done though. And neither do I."

"So now you're informing for them."

"Honey, what I learned in my old line of work holds true in my new line. You got to keep the big boys happy."

Billie trailed off into soft needle scratchings but I didn't get up. I lit a cigarette and smoked it for a while. It tasted terrible. I stubbed it out. "Tell me about Nick." My voice sounded raw.

"First you tell me how you got that list."

I shook my head.

"Then at least tell me why."

"I was looking for Jack Seeberg's name. I thought if he were a player, it would give me some extra ammunition." I picked up the paper and scanned the names. Then I looked over at Tee. "He never comes, huh? I'm surprised."

"Never comes." Tee began playing with a strand of her long hair, twisting it around her finger, watching me. "He's not my lover, Paris. The truth is, I think he's quite fond of you."

The information about them not being lovers surprised me. I said, "He's been acting so goofy lately, it just never occurred to me. I should have known, how come I didn't know?"

"You mustn't tell him you know, whatever you do."

"Is there a deadline, I mean . . ."

"First of February."

"God." So dumb. I wanted to kill him. "But he definitely told you?" I was guessing now. "That he was the informer?"

"After I asked him point-blank."

"How could he have been so stupid? Why would he even have gotten involved?"

"We all make mistakes," Tee said. "Don't we."

"But what's he going to do, seriously? I mean where is he going to come up with $3100?"

Tee said nothing.

"And the MG. I think he took out a bank loan. I mean, who does he think he is?"

Tee stretched her arms behind her head and yawned. "Don't be so hard on him, Paris. You just been livin' on the wrong side of the tracks." She brought her arms down and smiled sardonically. "Welcome to the world of counterfeit presentment, to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare."

I wasn't in the mood for Shakespeare from a prostitute. The door flew open and Mrs. Keyes stepped in. She clamped her hands on her hips.

Tee laughed. "Heck, let's eat."

28

A local operator put me through to Bakersfield after a fifteen-minute wait for the party line to clear.

The gentleman answering the telephone, a Mr. Red Hanks by name, said he did indeed have a daughter named Carole, only as of now she was up at the diner working her morning shift.

"Do you know what time she gets off? I'm a friend of hers and I'm driving up from L.A."

Mr. Hanks, drifting in and out of a bad connection, mumbled something about "till whenever they finish lunch."

Tee was still asleep upstairs. I rang my mother. After the usual pleasantries—make that banalities—I asked her if she knew anyone named Davis.

"Of course," my mother said. "I know Bette."

"Right," I said. "Anyone else?"

"Bill Davis, the real estate man. You know him, honey. He lives way out there on Nichol's Canyon, I think we took you there once. It's the only house on the whole road. The dirt road," she added with emphasis.

"Would the Seebergs know him?"

"Well I couldn't say. There's also Graham Davis, the architect who ran off with the wife of that playwright, poor man. It was a scandal." She paused. "I think the Mallorys down the street are using him. Yes, I'm sure of it."

"Where does Graham Davis live?"

"Near Marion Davies. Dav-ees, not Davis."

"You mean at the beach? Or near her house in Beverly Hills?"

"The beach place. I don't know why this interests you, Paris. They're not our kind of people. We stopped going to their card parties even before he ran off with—"

"What card games, mom?"

"Those Tuesday-night gin rummy things at their house. The men play cards in one room and the wives would . . . I thought it was terribly gauche."

"The wives would do what?"

"You had to tell something personal about your husband. They went around the room. The things some of those women came out with would burn your ears off."

"Did the Seebergs go?"

"I really don't remember," my mother said.

Next I dialed Walter. Six rings. Then a frog croaked, "Yeah."

"It's Paris," I said." How would you like to have lunch today?"

There was a long deliberating silence followed by a paroxysm of coughing. "Christ, you mean it's already today, today?"

"I'm afraid that's the bad part. The good part is I'm treating."

"Always got to take the bad with the good—why is that?" Walter said.

I said I wish I knew.

"Yeah, all right, kid. Lunch. How about the Pantry, one o'clock."

"I was thinking more along the lines of Dick's Diner."

Another fit of coughing rumbled through the phone lines. "What the devil is Dick's Diner?"

"It's quite the spot, I'm told."

"Where is it?"

"We need to get an early start. Say, ten-thirty? You can pick me up. I'm on the way, actually."

"The way to *where*?"

"That's the other bad part," I said.

The winding two-lane road to Bakersfield was, understandably, empty, and Walter was pushing the Packard hard.

"I think Mrs. Seeberg knows something and that she's really weird." I was holding onto the leather grip on the door. We weren't going more than forty, but the cresting ridge route wasn't built for straightaway speed.

Walter patted the brown bag on the seat between us and pulled out a pint of whiskey. I gave him a look, which he ignored.

"Anyway, they had a date with people named Davis the night of the seventh. I want to find them."

He took a swig then glanced in the rearview mirror. "You been checking on Tooker?"

"No Tooker." I pulled the bottle out of his hand and put it back in the paper bag.

"And no more dead birds, I take it?"

"Everything is fine."

Walter shot me a look. "How do you know?"

"What do you mean how do I know? I know."

"You been watching to see if anybody's following you?"

"Who would follow me, Walter? I spent all of yesterday on the bus." I hesitated. He was checking the rearview mirror again. "Don't tell me we're being followed."

He grinned crookedly. "I wish we were. 'There's not a lovelier sight in ere the wide world than that of fair hair billowing out of yon convertible.'" Walter cleared his throat. "Lord Byron, I believe."

I spun around in my seat. Tee's black coupe was maybe a couple of hundred yards behind. Damn her. I turned back around.

"Goody for you," I said to Walter. "Your wish has come true."

Dick's Diner was set off the highway by a gravel apron which, as we pulled up just after one, still contained three cars and a truck. It was either the beginning of Bakersfield or the living end, for the highway seemed to expire at a stop sign just ahead. The sunlight had already expired, a hundred miles back in the San Fernando Valley. Or maybe it simply didn't extend this far. A drugstore and a market claimed two corners of the intersection, signaling at least a meek attempt at civilization.

Walter got out of the car and stretched, sizing up the diner with a long glance. It looked like the real thing, a metal railroad car that had come to the end of the line. It was painted electric blue and I suspected that when lit, the neon sign above it, Dick's Diner, was probably electric blue, too.

"Nice-looking place," observed Walter. "I should have worn a tie."

I took his arm and coaxed him toward the entrance. "Now don't be offended but after we eat, when I try to talk to this girl? I want you to, uh, leave."

"Leave?"

"I think I'd do better alone." I smiled. "Don't you?"

"You've got to be kidding." Walter straightened his Ernest Hemingway safari jacket and patted the collar on his white shirt.

"I'm serious."

"Then get humorous. Maybe this will help you. I leave, the car leaves. You know how to hitch? Watch me." Walter patted his hair and stuck out his left leg. He leaned down and raised his pant leg. Then he jutted out his hip. "Something along those lines, I believe. Care to try?"

Immediately a horn sounded. Tee waved but did not stop. Walter brightened. "I think she likes me," he said.

There were eight stools at the counter, six of which supported bodies, and three booths along the wall, all vacant. Walter and I settled into the middle booth. The table was freshly set with three plastic flowers tilting out of a juice glass and two paper place mats that said, "Can You Name the 33 Presidents of the United States?"

Behind the counter a man wearing a long white apron over a T-shirt flipped hamburgers and chatted with two customers in overalls. I took the man to be Dick. Working beside him was a petite, dark-haired girl who was chewing on her lower lip as she attempted to add up a bill.

"That must be her," I whispered to Walter.

He tossed his keys on the table, then reached inside his safari jacket and removed two pencils from his shirt pocket. "I'll race you," he said.

I looked at the place mat and the two columns of blank lines. "Do they have to be in order?"

"Of course. Ready? Set—go!"

I was trying to decide who came first, Fillmore or Pierce, when a girlish voice said, "Hi. What'll you have?"

"Done," said Walter triumphantly.

I looked at the girl, hoping to find an indication that this was Carole Hanks. She stared vacantly at a space above my head. "I guess a hamburger with fries and a Coke." I watched her write it down on an orange pad, still chewing on her lip. She had a Buster Brown haircut, soulful eyes, and a pouty lower lip. She wore a faded gold-colored uniform with a brown checked collar and an air of weariness, as if the world, or Dick's Diner, had drained her of her life's blood.

"Uh-huh," she said to Walter.

"Same for me. Plus a side order of slaw."

Meticulously she wrote down Walter's order, too, then she turned away and sleepwalked back to the counter.

"Apparently no one plugged her in this morning," Walter remarked.

"Maybe that's not her."

"Or anybody," Walter said. He lit a cigarette and tried to read my presidents upside down. He grinned. "So much for photographic memories."

"They're unreliable," I agreed. "They only work if you remember to use them."

"You mean you didn't learn about the presidents in school?"

"The ones they made movies about, I did."

Walter reached over and turned my place mat sideways. He stared at me. "Mildred Pierce?"

I squirmed. "I guess Fillmore came first, huh? Well at least I got the important ones right."

Walter grinned wolfishly. "I doubt many people could name Mildred Pierce. Even out of order."

The hamburgers arrived. Then the french fries. Walter's coleslaw followed. Our waitress obviously hadn't been at it long. After she had dropped off the Cokes—fourth trip—Walter said to her, "Thanks, uh . . . don't tell me. Susie?"

A bare smile flickered across her face. "Carole."

Then it went out altogether and she moved limpidly away.

We finished eating and Carole came over to remove our plates, telling us she would be back in a minute to see if we wanted anything else. Just then the door flew open and in marched Tee. She called "Hi y'all," and sat down in the booth behind me.

I smiled at Walter. "Did you see how she looked at you?"

Walter craned his neck for a better view of Tee. Then he reddened. "She winked at me."

"Maybe she'll buy you coffee."

Walter's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Don't be silly."

Walter cleared his throat, stood and walked back to Tee. My seat jiggled as he sat down heavily on the other side of the booth. When Carole came back I paid the check. Then, without a word, I picked up Walter's keys and strolled out of the diner.

Ten minutes later, she came out the door, pulling on a navy sweater. I got out of Walter's car. "Carole?"

"Yes?"

"Could I speak with you for a moment?"

She hesitated, glancing up at the muddy sky as if I had thrown her a meteorological question. "What about?"

"I drove up from L.A. looking for you. I'm Paris Chandler."

She touched a button on the front of her uniform uncertainly. "Looking for me?"

"It's a story I'm working on for the *Los Angeles Examiner*. About a girl you knew named Anne Bardon."

Carole Hanks turned white. Her lips twitched but nothing came out.

I edged a step closer. "Are you all right?"

Gusts of wind, generated by the cars on the highway, blew hair across Carole Hanks's face. She shivered.

I turned and pointed to Walter's car. "We could sit in there. I only want to ask you a few questions." I hesitated. "Are you sure you're all right?"

She blinked a couple of times. I wondered if she were medicated, or took dope. I reached out and touched her arm. "Come."

I put her in the passenger seat and I climbed in behind the wheel. I told her to lock her door. Then I took my notebook out of my purse and leaned it up against the steering wheel. But I didn't open it.

"Can you tell me how you met Anne?"

She took a deep breath. "Sorry. This is all so unexpected. As you can see, I'm still real upset."

"You were close to her then?"

"Heck, I don't know. I was with her a lot. But I wouldn't say I was close. I'm not sure how close anybody got to her. She was a very cold person."

I rolled down the window slightly and took out a cigarette. I held it up. Carole shook her head. "Go ahead, I don't mind. But I want something understood, okay? I'll talk to you but you can't use my name in your newspaper article." She smiled faintly. "I used to know a guy at the *Times*. I know how you people work."

I said fine.

"I met her through Jack Seeberg."

Although her voice was unsettingly childish, her manner had become more focused. She seemed rather frail for someone who handled horses. Or men like Jack Seeberg.

I said, "How did you meet him?"

"I used to exercise horses at Griffith Park and I gave riding lessons, too. I gave lessons to his wife."

I held perfectly still. "You taught Helen?"

"Yeah. And one day her car wouldn't start and he came to pick her up. He told me I should go see him at MGM. He said I . . ." She blushed. "Was made for the movies."

I grinned.

"We went to lunch and he asked me if I wanted to be an actress. I said it had never entered my mind. I told him I had been around horses all my life and I was pretty happy."

"Go on."

"He asked me if my family was well off. I had to laugh. My dad's a farmer and we did okay until he got his heart condition. He's not even supposed to climb stairs and it's hard finding help who'll work as hard as he did. That's why I went to L.A. To help my folks out."

"What did he offer you, Carole?"

She studied the empty highway. Inside the diner, I could see Walter pass something over to Tee.

"He said his wife told him I was a good instructor and that he would like to hire me to give lessons to some actresses at the studio. He said one of them was looking for a roommate and if I wanted, I could live with her for free." She folded her hands in her lap and looked at me. "He was nice, really."

"How old were you?"

"This was two years ago. I was nineteen."

"Who did he have you move in with?"

"Kiki Sawyer. She had a place in Santa Monica. She's nice but a little dumb."

"What happened next?"

"I'm there about two weeks and everything's fine. Then one night I get home and Kiki's getting all dolled up. She says Jack's coming over and that I should hurry up and take a shower and put on something pretty. She says Jack likes to be entertained and he's such a good egg, he always leaves some money and we can go out and get a real nice dinner."

I looked at the empty page of my notebook. But I didn't write anything down.

"I didn't even have a dress. So Kiki lends me one of hers and here comes Jack. He's carrying two boxes and he gives us each one and tells us to hurry up and change. Kiki takes me into the bathroom and we open the boxes. Underwear."

I didn't say anything.

"Black lacy brassiere, garter belt, stockings, the whole getup. I tell Kiki there's no way I'm putting this stuff on, going back out there. Kiki says, What's the problem? Jack never stays long and then we can go eat a steak."

"Uh-huh." I glanced up. Walter and Tee were coming out of the diner. I watched Tee get into her car and drive away. Walter stood there and stared at her fading exhaust fumes.

"When we go back out, Jack's not in the living room. He's in the bedroom, sitting in a chair in the dark. Kiki turns on a lamp and throws a red scarf over the shade. Jack tells us we look beautiful."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Open up," Walter said, and began banging on the window.

Carole just stared at him.

"Go away." I rolled up my window. Walter kept banging.

I turned away from him and tapped the steering wheel. "This is a loaner from the shop. I had to bring my car in and they didn't trust me to drive up here alone. That guy's my mechanic. He'll quiet down soon."

Walter went around and sat on the hood and glared at us. I turned to Carole Hanks. "I'm sorry. Please go on."

She pulled the sweater tightly around her, staring out the windshield. After a moment she said quietly, "I guess you can figure out what happened next. When Kiki began to undress me, I started to cry. She took me back in the bathroom. She kept saying it was just like a movie. We were actresses and all we had to do was pretend, and then he'd go away."

She paused. Walter was lying across the hood, grinning maniacally. I said, "Did he always just watch?"

". . . No."

"How much money did he give you?"

"That night he left a twenty. But I didn't go out. I was sick. Kiki went somewhere. When she came back she gave me ten dollars." Carole smiled wryly. "Kiki was always good about the money."

Big droplets of rain began to splatter on the windshield. Walter shot me a withering look, got down off the hood and lumbered back to the diner. He sat down on the metal step under the door and stared expressionlessly at the car.

The rain drummed on the roof. "And somewhere along the line you met Anne Bardon."

"Yeah. She was like the queen bee of the group. She let everyone know Jack was hers."

"And how did the other girls take that?"

Carole shrugged. "Nobody cared. I mean, the other girls just wanted to be in the movies. And have nice clothes and things. Jack, he always said the arrangement was like a tuition-paid college education. And Lauralee and Kiki and Yvette fooled themselves into thinking they'd become stars and then they wouldn't need Jack anymore. But Anne, she saw through that. She wanted to make sure she would be a star, and Jack was going to be her insurance policy for life."

"Which is why she got pregnant." I opened my purse to get another cigarette.

Carole snickered. "Yeah. Sure."

I glanced up. But she was staring out into the rain.

I lit the cigarette, cracking the window just a bit. "So you knew about Henry Tooker."

There was a sharp intake of breath. She reached for the door handle and clutched it. I turned to check on Walter. He was gone. Probably he had ducked inside. I said, "Carole?"

"Yeah, all right. I knew about Henry. She told me one night."

"Why?"

"Because she was upset about . . . It all got so complicated."

"Tell me."

"Anne was supposed to get a big role in Jack's next movie. Then she gets pregnant and Jack tells her she can't have the part. He's going to give it to Lauralee."

"Which is what is known as bad timing."

"Not really," Carole said. "Not the way Anne saw it. She figured once she told Jack she was pregnant he would want to marry her. Then the picture wouldn't matter. She could do other films after the baby came. But Jack wouldn't marry her. And boy, did they have a fight. Which is when she came to talk to me."

"Why you?"

"Because I wasn't an actress, and I guess she thought I was the only one of us who wouldn't stab her in the back."

"Mm." I threw the cigarette out and rolled up the window. "What did she say—when she came to see you. And where was Kiki?"

"Kiki was gone. She moved in with Yvette right before Christmas." Again the wry smile. "Yvette had a nicer place. Mine was the starter apartment, I guess."

"And . . . you still had your arrangement with Jack?"

A small hesitation. "Yes, I . . ." She let her sentence hang in the air.

"All right."

"So she'd had this fight with Jack. A real lulu. She threatened to tell his wife she was pregnant, he hit her, crazy stuff like that. Finally he tells her to go to hell and walks out. She was hysterical."

"But why was she so sure he would marry her?"

"He told her it killed him that he didn't have kids. He said it was his wife's fault. Anne figured differently. She said that's why he's such a womanizer. To prove his manhood. She figured the baby was the key to his heart."

"I see." The rain seemed to be letting up. Which meant Walter would be charging out of the diner any minute. I said, "All right. So she has no husband and no film. Now what?"

"She knew I came from a farm in Bakersfield. She asked if she could come up and stay for a while. She wanted Jack to think she'd gone to Iowa to have the baby. She tells me he's paying her ten thousand bucks. So she's going to take the money and come to Bakersfield. And have an abortion. She had the name of some doctor. Then she would go back to L.A., tell Jack she'd had an accident and get the role in the movie."

"What about Henry?"

"She wasn't sure. But you ask me, she was going to dump him."

"When was she planning to come to Bakersfield?"

"I told her forget it. My family had no idea what I was mixed up in. I was getting pretty sick of it myself, to be honest."

I glanced at the diner. Still no Walter. "When was this conversation, do you remember?"

"Sure. New Year's Eve. She was on her way to Mocambo."

"Carole, could Jack have killed her?"

I watched her carefully, trying to see into her thoughts. But her face showed nothing. "I don't think . . . I mean . . . I don't want to say what I did was right. But Jack, I don't know, he makes you feel special. He was never mean that I saw. I know they fought, but still I can't see him setting out to kill her. Except . . ."

"What?"

"Well he had this gun. It was in the glove compartment. He showed it to me once."

I said, "And Tooker?"

"I never met him." She paused. "Look, there's your mechanic."

Walter was walking, head down, toward the car. His clothes were damp. I unlocked the rear door and rolled down my window. "Hop in," I called. "We'll only be a minute."

Walter climbed in and hunkered down, glaring. He must have found a friend in Dick, for fresh alcohol fumes came washing over the front seat. I said to Carole, "When was the last time you spoke to Anne?"

"The day she was killed. She called me at the stables that afternoon. She said she was going to Iowa and she had to move out of her house—could she send some of her stuff to Bakersfield until she got back? I said okay. Then she says she's supposed to meet Jack at the beach at nine o'clock and could I drive her there. Her car was in the shop."

"And?" I said, holding my breath.

"I told her I would. But when I got to her house at eight-thirty, she was gone. I mean I rang the bell and no one answered. So I went home."

I let out my breath. "Do you have any idea who did drive her?"

"Nope. When I found out she was dead, I left town." She lifted her chin. "Poverty has its points."

"Thank you for . . ." I paused. "Wait a minute. That's when you left town?"

Carole glanced quickly at me, then her eyes slid to her lap. "Yes, the next day. After Yvette called me at the stables. To cancel her riding lesson."

"You mean on the eighth? On that Wednesday? But the story only broke that afternoon. And she hadn't been identified yet."

Carole was still looking at her lap. Twisting her fingers together.

I said, "What did Yvette tell you, exactly?"

"That Anne was dead. Somebody had shot her and we weren't supposed to say anything."

I could hear the three of us breathing.

Carole turned around and looked at Walter. "Hi," she said. "I'm Carole Hanks."

"Hi," said Walter. "I'm Damon Runyon."

"Well do you see that truck over there, Mr. Runyon? That's mine."

"Nice truck," Walter said.

"Only it's making a funny clunking noise." Carole smiled sweetly. "I was thinking maybe you could take a look."

29

Walter stopped at a gas station to fill up, refusing money from me with a curt shake of his head. Except for that exchange, neither of us had said a word since we left Dick's Diner twenty minutes before. I hadn't known Walter long enough to have seen him through his moods; this looked like a new one. And now, as we pulled out of the Texaco station, he finally raised the curtain on it.

"Look kid, forget it. I don't blame you. Really." He laughed bitterly. "I'm nothing but a dust mote in the living room of life."

I said, "What?"

"Forget it. All right? You shouldn't be wasting your time with a sodden wretch like me."

"Walter . . ."

"You know what I am? I'm a Eugene O'Neill character who fell off the page. A fatuous, sniveling drunk. A total screw-up. A . . ." He paused to sneak a look at me. "A cootie in the mattress at night."

We were going west on 66 to the Pacific Coast Highway, a flatter, somewhat faster way home. It was five o'clock and nearly dark.

I said, "A cootie? I don't see how you can be a cootie, Walter, *and* a dust mote. I think you're pulling my leg."

"I thought I could teach you something about this trade. But you see, even there I was wrong. The only thing I'm good for in this life is—"

"Making ridiculous conversation," I cut in. "I know you're sore and you have a right to be. I shouldn't have done what I did. It's just that girls talk better to girls. Honestly, that's all I was thinking."

"I don't blame you, Paris. A nice, well-brought-up young lady like you."

"Which reminds me," I said. "What did you think of Theodora Jones?"

"I think," said Walter, stealing another glance at me, "that Miss Jones would not have locked me out of my very own car."

It was eight-thirty when we pulled up to my house. The driveway was already full; the front door stood wide open. "Looks like a party," I said to Walter as he parked at the curb. "Why don't you come in?"

In order, starting from the street, were cars belonging to Tee Jones, Betty Fox, and . . .

"The cops?" said Walter, as he came around the back of his car.

I headed up the drive enjoying the sweet air the rain had left behind. "Probably Billy Beame." I stopped. "On second thought, maybe I shouldn't go in."

It was too late. Beame was standing in the doorway in all of his brown nylon glory, grinning. "Evening, Miss Chandler. Long time no meet."

I took a step backward so I was even with Walter. "Promise you'll stay with me," I whispered.

"Ha," Walter said.

Beame said, "Been out to dinner? Nice night for it."

I took Walter's arm. "What's even nicer, Sergeant, is coming home at this hour to find you. Walter, you must meet Sergeant Beame of the Santa Monica police force. He's the poor soul who has been working on the Anne Bardon case, which I believe I may have mentioned to you."

Beame squinted. "Walter? Not Walter Ainsley, pray tell."

Walter bowed.

"Yeah, I heard of you, Ainsley. Used to fancy yourself a dime-store Dick Tracy. What are you doing here?"

We walked up the steps. "Don't be impolite, Sergeant. Come inside and we'll all have a drink."

Into the study we trooped. I switched on the lights and walked over to the liquor cabinet. I turned. "Sergeant, what will you have?"

"I'm actually on duty, believe it or not."

"Walter?"

"Nothing for me either." I looked at him. He sat down grumpily on the couch, saying, "So, Beame. What's the lowdown?"

Beame pushed the ottoman aside and sat down in my red leather chair. I didn't like that. I walked away from the liquor cabinet and stood on the other side of the coffee table from Walter.

"Scram, Ainsley. This is between Miss Chandler and myself. If you catch my meaning." He grinned that smart-alecky cop grin.

Walter showed his teeth. "You've been working too hard, copper. You can't tell her what to do in her own house." He hesitated. "Paris and I can't stand to be apart."

I was not in the mood for boy games. I said, "Billy, you look beat. Tell us what is going on. Walter will find out anyway—I'll tell him."

Beame narrowed his eyes. "Is Ainsley working on this, too?"

"What do you mean—*too*?" I demanded. "I'm Etta Rice's legman and Walter is now the paper's number-one copy editor. Maybe you'd like a glass of water."

"I would not." Beame scowled. "Are you going to remain standing? Fine. A guy comes into the station. He claims that on the night of the murder he pulled into a parking lot off the PCH. He was with his girl, he said. He said it was a cold, rotten night, not much action on the beach. In fact, there was only one other car parked. That's why he noticed it."

"Mm," I said.

"What he particularly noticed about it, there were two dames in the front seat."

"He saw that? As you know, Sergeant, December and January, the fog often rolls in quite thickly."

Beame ignored me. "The passenger door opened and a girl got out. She headed for the beach. The other one stayed in the car."

"Probably a lover's quarrel," Walter put in.

"Shut up," Beame said mildly.

I said, "Please go on."

"The guy's girl decided she didn't want to stay, so they took off. He didn't get the plate numbers 'cause, heck, why should he? But he described the car as a dark DeSoto. Not new. Ring a bell, Miss Chandler?"

"Only that half the people in America have dark DeSotos. What happened to the girl on the beach?"

"I believe she died. It's the other girl I'm interested in. The driver."

Yeah, me, too, I thought. I shrugged. "I don't know. Honest."

"Well if you decide you do know, or you find out, you'll call me, won't you."

"Of course. And that reminds me . . . did you run down my tip on Henry Tooker?"

I could feel Walter's eyes shoot in my direction. Beame noticed the look as he turned from Walter to me and back again. "We think he's outta state." He got heavily to his feet. "By the way, where were you this afternoon, Miss Chandler?"

In the silence that followed, I could hear voices in the kitchen. One of them was laughing.

Walter said, "She was in Bakersfield. She drove up there with me."

"Which state?" I asked.

"Bakersfield?" said Beame. "You went all the way to Bakersfield today? What for, Ainsley? The weather?"

"Is he in Chicago?" I persisted.

"That's not a state." Beame took a step forward.

"Don't be cute," Walter said. "I went to look at a truck."

"A truck," said Beame.

"Yeah. A Ford pickup. But it was a waste of time." Walter made a face. "The thing was a lemon."

After Beame left, I made a quick pass through the kitchen. Betty Fox said she was waiting for the return of her hero from the movie set. Tee was eating something that resembled stew. Mrs. Keyes, thrilled to have company, was catching the other two up on the latest plight of Ozzie and Harriet, who were about to come on the radio at nine-thirty.

I poured a glass of milk, grabbed a handful of cookies and departed. Walter was studying the bookshelves. I sat down in my chair, put the milk and the cookies on the cigarette table and said, "The mechanic who fixed Anne's car said she drove off with a dark-haired woman in a blue DeSoto."

He was still studying the books. He pulled one out and began paging through it. "Uh-huh."

"Lauralee Hart has dark hair. So does Mrs. Seeberg." I bit into a cookie.

"You're doing just fine."

I put down the cookie. "I'm not doing just fine, Walter. I want to work with you. I like working with you. You've taught me a lot. I mean, without you, I'd probably be over at Mrs. Empty Face's soiree this evening, eavesdropping on God knows who. Or someone."

"It's late." He held up the book and shook it at me. "Mind if I borrow this?"

"You're thinking I have to talk to Jack Seeberg, aren't you? Well before I do, I have another idea. Carole Hanks told me that he keeps a gun in the glove compartment."

Walter was almost out the door. He stopped and stood very still.

"You like that, don't you."

He wheeled around. He was not smiling. "Do they have more than one car?"

"I don't know."

"Find out."

I followed him into the hallway. "What's the book?"

"*Gulliver's Travels.*"

"Really? Why *Gulliver?*"

His hand was on the doorknob. "Misery loves company."

The door closed softly behind him.

I collected the milk and cookies, turned off the lights in the study, grabbed the mail from the wall rack and went upstairs to my bedroom. I closed the door. I sat down on the bed and dialed Nick's number. Busy. I started going through the mail. There was a letter from my lawyer, which I opened, and a bill from my gardener, which I did not. The letter informed me of a new court hearing date, re: my house. Nick was still on the phone. A flyer from a fortune teller urged me to call immediately for an appointment with Madame La Tour. The last envelope bore no return address. I opened it. Inside, typed on a sheet of plain paper, was the message: Stop by this evening if you can. Need to talk. Sincerely, Henry Tooker.

Below his name he had typed his address, the same one as before. Well well.

I looked at the postmark on the envelope. It was stamped "11 o'clock, Jan. 21." which was today. So it must have come in the afternoon delivery. I dialed his number from memory. No answer. I went downstairs.

Tee was still at the kitchen table, working on a piece of cherry pie. She excused herself and followed me out into the hall. "You're not sore, are you? About this afternoon?"

I grinned. "You couldn't have timed it better with a stopwatch."

"When you walked out of the diner like that, I thought you were sore. But it was great to see Walter again."

"You *know* him?"

"Haven't seen him since before the war. He used to come around back then." She paused. "Not that I knew him intimately. Though I could tell you of a girl who did."

I smiled wickedly. "Tell me in the car," I said.

Henry Tooker lived on Waring, just around the corner from Anne Bardon's house. The address belonged to a two-story flat-roofed stucco bungalow that sat on a bit of lawn.

Tee pulled up to the curb. "This is it?"

I nodded.

"I don't think anybody's home."

I stared at the pitch-black house. He hadn't even left an outside light on. I said, "I'll go ring the bell. Maybe he fell asleep. He strikes me as the kind of person who would just fall asleep. Or maybe he left a note."

I got out of the car and followed the flagstones up to the front door. There was no note. There were no muffled sounds filtering out. I looked up at the second story. A large VACANT sign hung in one window. Next to the door bell it said, "Tooker." I pushed the bell.

More silence. Yeah, thanks, Henry. So kind of you to drag me out.

Which is when I noticed, just barely, that the front door was not tightly shut.

I gave it a little nudge. It creaked open an inch. I gave it a bigger nudge. It swung all the way open. I slipped my left hand inside the doorframe and felt the wall for a switch. I found one and flipped it. A tiny hall sprung up from the dark. I stepped into it, calling his name.

To the right, the hall opened directly into a dining room.

Sheaves of musical scores tumbled across the table and onto the four wooden chairs. His trumpet case stood in the corner. To the left, a large square had been cut through the dividing wall into the living room, perhaps to give it a more open feeling. A French door was open at the back of the living room, which accounted for the breeze that was ruffling the newspaper at Henry Tooker's feet. The feet were inside brown leather slippers that rose up from the dusty wooden floor like a pair of matched tombstones.

I crept around the carved-out wall and stepped down into the living room. I leaned over and switched on a tarnished brass floor lamp. A pool of light fell across Henry Tooker's waxen face and spilled onto his red-stained undershirt.

Footsteps came to a stop behind me. "Hold it."

I whirled around. Tee was standing in the entrance hall, feet spread, gun in hand. Her hair spilled over a bulky black jacket with too many pockets. White cotton gloves poked out of one of them. "There might be somebody here. Wait."

I inched closer to the body. Henry was flat on his back, eyes wide open. His mouth was open, too, and there was a little dribble of saliva at the left corner. He was wearing a pair of brown wool slacks and the bloody undershirt. A small singed brown hole showed on the left side of it.

It was only when I was able to draw my eyes away from his face and his blood that I noticed a piece of paper crumpled in his right hand. I could hear the distant sounds of doors opening and closing. I bent over and, instinctively holding my breath, tried to pull the paper free. I jumped. A sheet of newspaper came up suddenly, then fell across the corpse, blown adrift by a gust of wind. Slowly I let out my breath.

. . . It wouldn't give. I knelt and began to pry the piece of paper from his vicelike grip, moaning. "Come on, Henry, let go."

Part of it tore free.

What I got was all I needed, and it sent a chill rippling down my spine.

NOW DEAD: TWO BIRDS, ONE HEPCAT. LAY OFF, BIRD DOG . . . LAY OFF.

"Paris, what's the matter?"

Tee tugged the paper from my frozen fingers. Then she looked at me. "It was in his hand," I said woodenly.

She stooped and touched Henry's face with the back of her hand. "He's been dead for most of the day, I'd guess. Who is he?"

"Anne Bardon's other boyfriend. The one who said he got her pregnant." I took a breath. "He's been missing for a week or so. Which shows you what Walter knows."

She looked at me quizzically.

"Walter thought Henry killed Anne. That's his name, Henry Tooker. Or was."

Tee was still giving me a funny look. "But what made you come here tonight?"

"There was a note in the afternoon mail, telling me to stop by this evening. He wanted to talk." I glanced at Henry. He looked like he had changed his mind.

Tee said, "But who could have known that? This note was like the other one. This note was intended for you."

I got shakily to my feet. "Let's do a quick search. Maybe there's something to connect him with . . ." I looked around. "Something."

Tee grabbed my arm. "Paris, you dope. Somebody knew you would be coming here tonight."

"So?"

"So let's go, Kokomo."

I walked over to the table in the dining room and began shuffling through the sheet music.

"Don't you realize the killer could come back?"

Lots of Cole Porter, the guy really liked Porter. The Gershwin brothers, too. I glanced up. "That's what I've got you for, Annie Oakley."

I left Tee sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, gun drawn. Having completed her own search, she told me it was my turn. "And someone needs to keep an eye on the front door."

She had given me a flashlight, retrieved from one of the zillion pockets in her jacket, and the gloves, then flicked off the lamp and the light in the center hall. Which left her babysitting The Corpse Henry in the dark, a prospect too spooky for me even to contemplate.

I went into the bedroom.

It looked like a prison cell on the lam from a federal penitentiary. A single cot dominated the room, the sheets all bunched up in the middle. On the bedside table, which was an orange crate, stood a wooden lamp that looked as if it had been made by a high school shop class. Beside it was a picture of Anne Bardon in a dime-store frame. It was one of those publicity stills from the studio. Bright smile showing a row of nice, even teeth, her eyelids at half mast to give her that sleepy, sexy look that actresses slaved to perfect. I shone the flashlight on the lower right-hand corner of the photo. *To my darling Hank, affectionately, Anne.*

Inside the tiny closet hung a maroon and blue pinstriped suit, the one Henry had worn the night I had talked to him. There were several nylon shirts, a windbreaker, and two pair of shoes, one black, one brown. Underwear was stacked on the floor of the closet. Beside it was a laundry bag. I slipped on the gloves and felt inside; dirty towels.

As I was straightening, I just caught a glimpse of it, sitting on the floor, back of the closet, hidden by the lumpy bulk of the laundry bag. I could have missed it, back there in the corner, a small metal lockbox, the kind you needed a key to open. But somebody had saved me the trouble. The key was in the lock, the lid thrown back. The box was empty.

I went over to the orange crate. The front panel had been torn off, giving Henry access to the shelf inside. I reached in and took out the stack of letters, held together by a rubber band. Seven. I opened the first envelope in the stack. I skipped the careful handwriting and jumped to the signature. *Affectionately yours, Anne.*

"Eureka," I said.

"Oh, just letters?" Tee got to her feet. "I mean, as long as we're here."

"What, as long as we're here?"

"Money, for instance. Money talks. Like a bankbook or a pay stub."

My eyes drifted past Tee. Henry hadn't moved. "I thought you wanted to get out of here," I said, now wishing we would.

"Those letters were the first thing I saw in the bedroom. First thing *any*one would see in the bedroom. This was a calculated murder, Paris. If the killer was worried there was something here that he didn't want found, he would have taken it with him. If it was obvious. Let's look for the not obvious."

"I think it's already gone. There's a lockbox in the closet. Opened and empty. What do you suppose Henry would keep in a lockbox?"

But our search produced little else. Tee had gone up the stairs at the back of the house and found the second apartment—as advertised—vacant. The kitchen had only normal kitchen things and nothing was taped to the undersides of any of the drawers. The bathroom contained nothing of interest either. The sheet music was just . . . sheet music. In the living room, my back to Henry, I went through what appeared to be his only possession worthy of mention, a formidable collection of records. They seemed to hold no secrets.

I sidestepped over to the coffee table and shuffled through a pile of bills, overdue.

I glanced at my watch. It was eleven-thirty, too late to make the final edition. I'd had it for the day anyway. "Tee," I said. "Let's go."

"One minute."

I followed her into the dining room. "The most obvious is always overlooked." She shone the light directly on the trumpet case. "Let's look."

I held the flashlight while she opened it up. With gloved fingers, she removed the trumpet, then slid it back in place. I could see her feeling around in there. Suddenly she stopped moving.

Straightening now, she was holding a piece of paper, folded in half. She opened it then handed it to me. It was a receipt from the Shoreham Hotel in Chicago, two nights, three fifty each. At the bottom of the bill, a telephone number was printed in pencil along with another number, 4301.

Tee was pulling something else out of the case, grinning. She held up a small black bankbook.

"How much?"

Tee opened it up. "Now where do you suppose he got *this* kind of money?"

Henry's balance showed $47.03. I took the book and the flashlight from Tee and looked closer. The last transaction, in which he had taken out fifty dollars, came on the day he had, possibly, climbed aboard the *Super Chief* to Chicago, the same day I had met him at Ernie's and abducted him in the Bentley.

The morning I had phoned him, hi, I'm Paris Chandler.

I felt my stomach muscles tighten. "All he really knew about me was that I worked for the *Examiner.*"

"So?"

"I'm not even in the phone book, Tee. The number is still listed under Russell Chandler."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Henry Tooker couldn't possibly have sent that letter to me."

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Sweetie:

I'm sitting under the dryer at Michael's, thinking about us and our tiny precious little secret. Are you happy, darling? I hope so. And soon, oh so soon, we will be together and away from here. Away from her prying eyes. I shall drop this in the mail now, while you are still probably sleeping, and hope you will have it when you wake up.

Affectionately,

I yawned.

Darling,

You must burn this when you get it. All arrangements have been made. He promised me the money

> *soon and you can be sure I'll get it, too! I just wish I could do something about* her. *She's driving me crazy! She's so jealous. Ha, if she only knew my plans. I hope I can see you tonight.*
>
> *Yours,*

I pulled the blanket up higher and stared balefully at the window. But I was too tired to get up and close it. So I looked at the blue sheet of paper with the nice handwriting and bald lies and tried to see into the person who had written them. But my mind had already shut down. Returning home, I had called the Sheriff's Department to alert them, anonymously, to a dead body on Waring Avenue, West Hollywood. I phoned Walter next. Picking up on the third ring and hearing my voice, he had said, "Christ. First you wake me up with the news that it's already today. Then, when I'm trying to put the lid on today, you call me again, prolonging it. What?"

I told him what. After which we had discussed the situation at length, Walter making me swear I would go nowhere without him or Tee, and then, yawning loudly, telling me to get to the paper early and we would take it from there.

I slid the letter, second one in the stack, back in its envelope. I remember putting the letters on my bedside table and winding the clock.

I don't remember turning off the lamp.

". . . You will get more pleasure from your work if you do not let others downgrade what you've accomplished."

31

The *Los Angeles Times* landed on my desk with an enormous thud, Constance McPhee Estevez's pointing finger only inches behind it. "Nice, huh, Paris? Will you just look at this!"

I already had. Larraine and Leo the Lip had married in El Paso but due to some Byzantine red tape, could not live together as man and wife for a year. I had been sitting at my desk for a while now, fidgeting, like an arthritic who senses an impending storm. The storm had just broken.

"So! Once again we have to read Hedda for the eyewitness account. I mean you'd think, knowing the nuptials were imminent, that Etta might, just might, have poured herself onto a train to Texas. But no, *no*! Etta gets her *girl* to place a call to Texas so that Etta, tireless reporter she, can speak with Larraine on the *phone*. The toad." She began flapping her hand in front of her face.

"I think I'm going to have a seizure now," she said ominously.

"Er, why don't you sit down instead, Constance? I've got the most *delicious* item we can run in the p.m."

The idea had been mine, a consolation prize I had given to myself. When I arrived at the paper, just before nine, wearing a light green wool dress that enhanced my eyes, wanting to make a good impression, I stopped in the city room first. No Walter. I had asked Fred Dickinson if he knew that Henry Tooker was dead. Fred, standing at his desk, busy, said, yeah, George Healy was on it, already heading over to West Hollywood. I told him I had some information. Which is when he looked up from his wire copy with a sigh and asked me to sit down.

"I had a letter from Tooker when I got home last night. He said to drop by, he wanted to talk."

Fred leaned back in his chair. His top drawer was open slightly and I could see the handle of the cap gun. He seemed to use it only in the afternoons.

I said I'd gone over, found the door open, gone in, discovered the body and left, shortening the account—waiting for Walter.

Fred nodded as if he were giving my report a great deal of thought. "When George comes in, tell him. It'll add good color. Any more dope? You look around?"

"I have some leads, someone else who might be involved. I'd like to pursue them."

The city editor grinned. "Naw, you'll get your pretty little dress all wrinkled. Tell me what you got, I'll pass it along."

Thank you Walter Ainsley.

Dismissed, and dealt out of the story, I went back to Society and nursed my anger over a cup of coffee, until after a while it came to me. A surprise invitation to Jack Seeberg to come join the party. I began to type.

And finished just as Constance came moping in. It read:

> *The mysterious, and as yet unsolved, murder of MGM starlet Anne Bardon took on a new twist last night when the body of Henry Tooker, a one-time trumpet player at Mocambo, was found in the living room of his West Hollywood home. (See related story, page 1). Tooker, who disappeared days after Bardon's body was found on the beach in Santa Monica, was believed to be the third party in Miss Bardon's secret love triangle. The actress's other amour, who* himself *has other amours (Hollywood is sooo complicated), is rumored to be a major-major studio player . . . sit tight."*

"How do you know this?" asked Constance, her face a mixture of ecstasy and suspicion.

"Oh," I said, mimicking how Etta Rice responded on such occasions. "You *know*."

"Well I don't, actually, not at all. Who is this major studio-player person?"

"That," I said, "I can't reveal, not even to you, not yet."

"Somebody's telling you these things, Paris?"

I nodded. "If you could spare me for a few days, I could devote full time to it."

Constance opened her enormous purse and pulled out a compact. She opened it, staring intently at her face. "We should take it up with cityside, don't you think, dear?"

"I have." I gave her a reassuring smile. "And right now," I said meanly, "poor Etta needs some bolstering."

Constance began layering on a fresh coat of orange lipstick. Her mouth formed a large, glistening O. "That *toad*."

I tapped the disconnect button twice, signaling Jo, telling her I needed to call Chicago. I had the hotel bill on the desk in front of me.

So he had taken the train to Chicago. Spent two nights, came back. Knowing the plan had been botched, but going anyway—why?

There was a ring. Jo said, "Putting you through."

I listened to a distant phone jingling in Chicago. Then, "Good morning, American Savings and Loan."

That stopped me.

"Good morning," I answered, trying to think.

"Hello? Can I help you?"

"Er, yes." I glanced at the 4301 written below the phone number that Henry, or someone, had scrawled. "My name is Mrs. Henry Tooker and I'm calling from Los Angeles, California. How are you this morning?" Buying time.

"Fine," said the woman.

"Good." Taking a shot at it now. "My husband recently opened an account, but we've lost the passbook. Could you send another?"

"Do you know your account number, Mrs. Tooker?"

"I think it's 4301."

"I'll have to check. Can you wait?"

Minutes clicked by before she returned. "What is your address, Mrs. Tooker?"

I gave her Henry's address. She said she'd send out a new passbook that afternoon.

"I think," I ventured, "that's our only account with your bank. Ten thousand dollars, right?"

"Minus a dollar for the new book and three cents for the postage, all right Mrs. Tooker?"

I told her it was all right.

I thought about Henry and the money for a while and wondered if he killed her for it. I played with my pencil. He still didn't seem the type.

After a while I dialed a number. A perky voice answered, "Seeberg residence."

"Is this Mrs. Seeberg?"

"This is Miss Hardy, her personal secretary. May I help you?"

Personal secretary? "I'm calling from the Association of Automobile Manufacturers of America," I began. "We're doing a survey to help carmakers gauge the demand for automobiles. I would only need a minute of Mrs. Seeberg's time."

"She's indisposed. Perhaps I can answer your questions."

"Fine. Can you tell me if the Seebergs presently have an automobile, and if so, what make." I spoke in a flat, bored voice.

"They have a Pierce-Arrow."

"One car," I said, "for . . . two people?"

"That's right. They're awaiting delivery on a second car, a Cadillac, I believe. They've been waiting for quite some time."

"A common problem," I murmured. "But the Big Three do hope to be back in full production by May. Which member of the household drives the car?"

"Usually Mrs. Seeberg."

"And Mr. Seeberg uses public transportation?"

Miss Hardy laughed. "Noooo. Either Mrs. Seeberg drives him to work or a car is sent from the studio. He's with a studio."

"In other words, Mr. Seeberg has use of a second car, so to speak?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"Uh-huh. Then it's safe to say the Seebergs have not been inconvenienced by the shortages?"

"Not exactly," objected Miss Hardy. "You never know when a studio car is going to be available. Mr. Seeberg hates to be made to wait."

"Then for purposes of this survey, we can say that today, being a typical day, Mrs. Seeberg has the Pierce-Arrow and Mr. Seeberg had a car drive him to work. Correct?"

"No. Mr. Seeberg took the car today. Mrs. Seeberg is not going out. Is that the end of your questions, I hope?"

I said it seemed so. And hung up.

An hour later, I was stepping off the bus at the MGM gate. I had talked Constance into letting me pursue "that nasty Anne Bardon thing," as she put it, for the rest of the day. I had then phoned Kate in the press office to tell her I would like to stop by for a few minutes. It was Wednesday; two more days without Bret, who was still on location dying somewhere. When I rang the house, Mrs. Keyes informed me that Tee had gone out and she was just leaving to do the marketing. Which left me with L.A.'s final resort: the bus.

Kate's office was located in the Publicist's Building facing Washington Boulevard on the southeast corner of the lot. The strike by the carpenters and painters was now in its fifth month and the pickets outside the gate seemed to have lost some of their steam. I glided past them, gave my name to the security guard and was waved in, but I didn't go up to Kate's office. Instead I took a stroll through the parking lot across from the Thalberg Building. The lot was for executives and VIP's only, each slot stenciled with the person's name.

Spencer Tracy's space was empty. So was Clark Gable's. Jack Seeberg's was not. It was filled with his Pierce-Arrow. I tried both doors. Locked.

I kept walking, past all the stenciled names: Ava Gardner, Wallace Berry, Gloria De Haven. I couldn't think how to get into that car. I turned up the next row, farther away, the names less familiar, the Siberia of the MGM parking lot. I stopped for a moment behind slot 133 and made a note to myself. I kept walking. I mean I couldn't just break a window in his car.

Finally I just gave up.

Kate Levine was trying to eat a sandwich and talk on the phone. She waved me into a chair, holding up a finger to indicate she would be only a minute more.

"For thirty-five dollars a week, I could be a cleaning lady, the way I sweep up dirt," she moaned, dropping the phone in its cradle.

"Only in Beverly Hills. And it's the same dirt."

Kate grinned. "So Paris, what boiling piece of gossip have you come to report today?"

"Relax. Finish your sandwich. I'm just fishing."

"Any particular pond?"

"Not really. What's filming right now?"

She licked her fingers and reached for a clipboard. "Let's see. *Desire Me* with Greer Garson. I think Mickey Rooney is here today for a meeting, if you want to grab him. Jack Seeberg is on Stage twenty-three with the *Unfinished Dance*." She looked up. "That's it, kiddo."

"Sorry." I yawned. "Who's in the Seeberg picture, anybody?"

Kate dropped the clipboard onto her desk. "You're not still interested in Anne Bardon, I hope."

"Not particularly," I said carefully. "Are you?"

"Nope." She picked up a pencil and lightly tapped the clipboard. "Margaret O'Brien, Cyd Charisse, and Lauralee Hart. Nice young actress. Why don't you give her a plug?"

"Why don't you tell me why I should."

"The studio's hot for her at the moment. They're planning a press luncheon I think."

I sighed and stood up. "I hate it when I'm desperate," I said.

We located Lauralee Hart in the Player's Building, a two-story oblong structure where the studio's featured performers—as opposed to the stars—kept dressing suites. It was not a place for ingenues, but then, Lauralee had connections.

As Kate and I entered the building, Lana Turner came sweeping out. She looked pouty. Maybe one of her gentlemen callers had failed to show. It was common knowledge at the studio, though unreported in the press, that Miss Turner had a secret door in the back of her closet, an escape hatch for a caller, should another arrive, ill-timed, at the door.

Lauralee's suite was on the second floor. Halfway along the beige-carpeted corridor, Kate stopped and knocked on a door. A white star with Lauralee Hart written in black script had been glued to it. The star was made out of cardboard.

"Come in!"

The reception cubicle—two chairs and a table—was unoccupied. Kate led me through to the dressing room.

Lauralee was sitting at her makeup table pinching her cheeks. She was wrapped in a ruby satin robe. Her feet were bare. As she turned toward us, her eyes widened.

"Lauralee, this is Paris Chandler from the *Examiner*. She—"

"How do you do?" I said, stepping forward. "I hope you don't mind us barging in. Kate insisted you are the new girl to meet and I would love a few words with you, if possible."

Slowly Lauralee stood up. Her face was expressionless. Then she smiled and held out her hand. "It would be my pleasure, Miss Chandler. Let's go in here." She dropped my hand and led us into the third room, which possibly contained furniture. It might even have been nice furniture, had it been allowed to breathe. Instead, every square inch was suffocating under the weight of clothes; scads of dresses, scarves, skirts, jackets everywhere, as if spewed forth by a lunatic sewing machine.

"Wardrobe and I seem to have a difference of opinion over how my character should look," said Lauralee heavily. "Wardrobe is the worst. I think they come from Poland."

With that, she walked over to the couch, picked up an armload of dresses and dumped them on the floor. "There! Let's sit."

Kate looked at her watch. "Oh, God. I've got some *Modern Screen* woman waiting to see Clark Gable. Lauralee, will you be okay?"

Lauralee gazed at me coolly. "It depends on what she wants." She tilted up her chin. "If it's dirt, I'm afraid I'll disappoint her. Or should I make some up?" She glanced at Kate.

"You're learning fast. Paris, I'll be in my office if you need me. Ta-ta."

As soon as Kate left, Lauralee's eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here, what do you want?"

"So nice to see you again, too." I grinned. "How's tricks? I mean that literally, of course."

She sniffed. "You're jealous."

"Ah, and here I was trying to be scandalous. I seem to have trouble with my ous-words." I sat down on the couch, which turned out to be beige damask. "Speaking of scandals—do sit down, Lauralee—did you tell Helen Seeberg that Anne was pregnant?"

She stood there in the middle of all her clothes, staring at me. Then she reached up and swept the black wing of hair out of her face. "You must be joking. Why would I?"

"Because Anne was a threat to you both. Carrying Jack's child was a threat to her marriage. Jack's attachment to Anne was a threat to your career. By telling Helen Seeberg what you knew, maybe you thought she would finally lay down the line with Jack. Jack did not want to lose his connubial fortune."

"Why should I care about Jack's marriage?"

"You care about your career. If Anne could be written out of the script, her roles might be passed on to you." I paused. "As they seem to have been already."

"I don't have to listen to this, I won't listen to this. I want you to leave."

"I'm not leaving. I may have played the wrong cards at lunch the other day, but I'm holding the winning hand now. Last night, a Sergeant Billy Beame of the Santa Monica Police Department dropped by my house. He's investigating Anne's murder. You might want to sit down."

"No thank you."

"He told me the night Anne was murdered, she was seen in a parking lot at the beach, getting out of a dark blue DeSoto. A woman was at the wheel. Ah, now you're sitting down, good. That was you, Lauralee. You drove Anne to the beach to meet Jack. On my way in here, I happened to spot your car in the parking lot. Your name was written across the space."

Lauralee glanced nervously toward the dressing room. "Jack will be back any minute."

I opened my purse and fished around for a cigarette. Before I lit it, I walked over to the windowsill and picked up an ashtray. "I didn't tell Sergeant Beame about your car because I didn't know it was your car." I struck a match. "Buy my silence, Lauralee. Answer my questions now."

I watched her deflate on the couch, drawing into the ruby robe as if she were shrinking. Suddenly I felt let down. She seemed an unworthy opponent.

Hands in her lap, eyes downcast, she began to speak so softly, I had to sit next to her to hear.

"I met Mrs. Seeberg about nine months ago, at a party. It was stupid of Jack to have made us come."

"Who?"

"Anne and Yvette and myself. But it was given by Mr. Mayer and Jack thought it would be good for us to meet important people there. We came together. He came with his wife. Anne was being obnoxious as usual, hanging around Jack in a very suggestive way. Finally he told me to get her out of there. While we were talking, Mrs. Seeberg came over and Jack introduced us."

"Uh-huh."

"A week or two later, I had finished my ballet lesson at Guy Van Gelder's studio, and I was in the dressing room changing out of my leotard when Mrs. Seeberg walked in. She was wearing a leotard and she was all sweaty and I thought how odd, because she hadn't been in my class. And there weren't any other classes at that time. I didn't find out till later that she was having an affair with Guy and she had obviously been upstairs with him."

"But wasn't he teaching your class?" I said.

"No. He teaches ballroom. Miss Howard teaches ballet. Anyway, she walked in and I said, 'Hi, Mrs. Seeberg.' I mean, there was no one else there. And she just kind of nodded and peeled off her leotard and went into the shower." Lauralee sat up suddenly. "I'm serious. Jack will be here any minute."

"Finish the story," I said.

"When she came out of the shower, I was sitting on the bench, tying my shoelaces, almost ready to leave. And she stops and looks at me and says, 'Anne? You're Anne Bardon, aren't you?' And I . . . I'm wanting to die . . . I say, 'No, Mrs. Seeberg. I'm Lauralee Hart. I met you at the Mayers' party.' And she just gives me this funny look and turns and walks to her locker."

"Go on," I urged.

"I'm leaving, I'm almost at the door, when she comes over and hands me this piece of paper. She says, 'I don't know if Jack gave you our phone number, but here it is. Call me if you ever feel you want to talk.'"

I stubbed out my cigarette. "Sure, Lauralee. Right."

"No, really. That's exactly what she did. And I'm looking at the paper and I'm looking at her and wondering what her scam is. And she just begins to laugh. She said, 'Don't tell Jack. This will be our little secret.' And I said, 'What little secret, Mrs. Seeberg?' And she said, 'Call and find out.'"

I looked at my watch. "It's almost two. I doubt you've told me one word of truth and I'm losing my patience. I really am."

Lauralee ignored that with a toss of her head. "So I called. I mean, wouldn't you? And she invited me to the house for lunch. First she took me into her studio. She's an artist of some sort. Spooky stuff. Lots of animals, and humans who look like they've just seen a ghost. Then we went outside and someone served us lunch by the pool. After a while she brought up Anne's name, asking me how well I knew her. I said we were friendly at the studio, but that was it. She told me to get to know her better."

"She wanted you to inform on her?"

Lauralee nodded. "The lady is cuckoo, I think. She never said she thought Anne was playing around with her husband, or treated me like she thought I might be, too. She just said anytime I learned something interesting about Anne to call her and she would—" Lauralee hesitated. "Pay me."

I was silent, admiring the shiftiness of these people. Dear little Lauralee, sweetly collecting money from both sides. I seriously doubted the story as she told it. I suspected that she, not Mrs. Seeberg, had initiated the relationship. But it didn't matter. I believed the relationship existed.

"How much did she pay for the pregnancy news?" I finally said.

Lauralee bit her lip.

"Come on. You did tell her, didn't you? I know you're not used to doing anything for free, Lauralee, but you're going to have to now. I'm not paying you with money. With silence, possibly."

I could see a flash of anger in her eyes. But after a moment it broke, along with that wonderful ingenue smile of hers. "Of course I told her, wouldn't you? But it's none of your business what she paid me." Lauralee shook her hair. "The truth is, she paid me less than usual. She . . . didn't believe me."

"No?"

"No. She laughed at me. She said Jack was sterile. She thought it was pretty funny."

"What did you think?"

"I thought Anne was telling the truth. God, it was all she could talk about. The way she bragged, I wanted to throw up."

"You never doubted Jack was the father? You knew about Henry Tooker, I suppose."

"Sure. But why would she mess up her career by having some palocka's kid? Besides, she told me *he* was sterile. A wound from the war kind of thing. She said that's why she could sex around with Henry and make Jack angry. She didn't have to worry at all."

The way their minds worked, the circuitousness of their thinking, reminded me of the maze of hedges in the Seebergs' backyard. It was the kind of subtle imagery good moviemakers knew how to exploit. I said, "All right. Tell me about the night of the murder."

"Like what?" The wing was back over her eye. I was looking at a one-eyed beauty with a cupid's red mouth. She licked her lips.

"Like why you drove her to the beach."

"It was Jack's idea that I go with Anne, not mine."

"Why?"

"I think he was nervous. Things had been pretty stormy between them. Maybe he was afraid she would make a scene. He thought it would help if I tagged along."

"What did Anne think?"

"She didn't know. Jack was supposed to call and tell her, but he never did. I showed up at her house about eight-fifteen expecting her to be furious. But she acted real surprised to see me. Then *she* asked if I could drive her to the beach."

"Okay."

"We got there a few minutes before nine. I didn't see

Jack's car in the lot, but Anne said he might have walked over from the party and—"

"The party at Graham Davis's?"

"Yes, that's the one. They're down the beach a bit and Anne was going to start walking over there."

"And you went with her?"

"I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"For one thing, she had been such a bitch in the car, telling me I was only stepping in for her temporarily and saying the game was far from over yet."

"What did that mean?" I asked.

"I said, 'Anne, don't tell me you're thinking of getting an abortion?' And she just laughed and got out of the car. So I decided to wait, thinking Jack would drive up and I could tell him."

"And did he?"

Lauralee shook her head. "After a while, I started thinking maybe Anne was right, that Jack had walked. So I got out of the car, and that's when I heard the shot."

"How did you know it was a shot? It could have been a car backfiring, no?"

"I just knew. I mean you hear guns go off on sets all the time." She hesitated. "Shall I continue?" she said sarcastically.

"Please do."

"Well it was really foggy. You could hardly see anything. I thought she had gone off to the right and I took a few steps, but then I got scared. What if it was a gangster and he saw me? So I got back in the car, locked the doors and waited. I figured Jack and Anne would both come back to tell me about the gunshot. But after about ten minutes, I think that's when it hit me. One of them had shot the other. And that's when I took off."

"And the next day . . ."

"No. That night. About eleven. Jack called and asked what happened to Anne, she didn't show up. I played dumb. I said when I went to her house she wasn't there and I didn't know anything. Look, you can't tell the police it was me. Jack can't ever know."

Her eyes grew round and large with pleading. For a moment, I saw how it must have been for her, carrying on as usual with this man whom she believed had killed a girl, a girl with ambitions so like her own. But the moment passed. The pleading could have been an acting job.

I said, "Lauralee, were you with Jack last night? Where was Jack last night?"

She blinked, not expecting that question at all. She licked her lips. "Tell me," she said hoarsely. "I'll pay you if you know."

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One of the first lessons of journalism is this: When you go in, go in with both barrels firing. Lesson Two: If you come up short in the ammunition department, you'd better make what you've got smoke.

Any seasoned reporter knows these lessons well, Walter Ainsley told me. The trouble was, he told me too late. Then again, even had I known these wise lessons of journalism, I don't know how they could have helped me.

"Now listen, kid, I don't care how good you think you are, the guy is going to lie to you, if he addresses the issue at all," is what Walter was saying as we sped toward MGM that night. "You may think you can wrap men around your little finger, but you ain't played ball with the big boys yet."

This, after we had rehearsed the scene sixty-five thousand times back at the office, Walter coaching me intently, referring to himself repeatedly as the Gipper, a reference to I don't know what.

I had hung around Lauralee's clothing farm a few minutes longer, hoping for an appearance by Seeberg. But soon the assistant director stuck his head in to say that Seeberg was holding a meeting on the set.

I called after him, catching him halfway down the hall to ask how late Seeberg normally worked.

"Tonight late," the boy had answered. "We're behind. Eight, nine o'clock, if we can get the scabs to stick around."

And last night, I inquired.

"There was a SAG meeting about the strike. So we broke off at six." He grinned. "Hepburn really lambasted Reagan for not supporting the strikers. I don't figure you'll see those two in a picture together soon. Er, gotta run."

All of this was duly reported back at the office before it was decided that like MacArthur, I would return.

"You mean play like Dem Bums?" I said nastily as I fished for a cigarette.

Walter braked hard for a light at Washington and La Cienega, sending the corned beef sandwiches hurtling to the floor. "You've got to set it up so that he believes he must talk to you, know what I mean? Say as little as possible. Let him fill in the blanks in his mind as to what you're getting at, okay?" Walter turned and looked at me skeptically. "But I doubt it's going to work."

"Why not? It doesn't matter if he denies everything. I just need quotes from him to write the story. You said that yourself a little while ago."

"Yeah, well I wouldn't know. I always got stuff."

I looked at him. "You always got stuff. Is that what you said? Well la-di-da for you Walter. You don't get stuff anymore. Not since you've named me as your stand-in. So live with it."

Walter stepped on the gas. "Jeez, pipe down, will you? You're so touchy. All I said was you haven't played ball with big boys yet. Why are women so touchy?"

"What about the gun?" I asked. "Should I bring it up?"

"How you going to bring it up? You're going to say, gee, Mr. Seeberg, your car door was locked so I couldn't check out the gun. Maybe you can tell me, has it been fired recently?"

I sighed. "All right, Walter." And stubbed out my cigarette.

I left Walter in the car, parked on Washington.

The security guard at the East Gate did not have my name on the list of expected visitors, since I wasn't particularly expected. I stood there saying, "It must have slipped his mind." Telling him I was Paul Masterson's daughter. Adding that, "Mr. Seeberg was kind enough to offer to show me the set." Getting in on a fib and a smile.

By eight o'clock, the lot was largely deserted and dark. The only lights came from single bulbs above doorways to bungalows and an occasional waist-high road lamp. My high-heeled shoes beat out a tap-tapping as I walked along the concrete paths. I was my own marching band.

Sound Stage 23 was a metal-sided hangar of a building three stories high and heaven knows how many acres inside. The broad vertical sliding door in the front of the building had been battened down for the night. A small side door was ajar. I slipped inside.

I was standing in a bare, narrow room. I stepped over boards and wires and went through the doorway, which led into the cavernous sound stage. Immediately surrounding me were more boards, wires, paint cans, tools, ladders and, dangling from the ceiling, all manner of lights. They were not turned on. This area of the sound stage was dark. I began picking my way carefully through the mess, stepping lightly on the concrete floor. A living room had been constructed to my left. It was dead. Up ahead stood a green bench with a park-scene backdrop constructed behind. Seeberg was at the far end of the building. He was standing over a round table, in a tableau bathed in light, conferring with two men. I stopped.

One of the men was Louis B. Mayer. The second man, taller and dark-haired, was the producer Max Levin. Moving along the edges of their tableau, like moths darting about a light, workmen shifted equipment. I held back. I didn't particularly want to run into Mayer, whom I knew. I wanted Seeberg to have to talk to me. With Mayer around, it would be easier for him to put me off.

I edged forward a step and waited.

"Don't tell me you can't use 'em again," Mayer was complaining. "We got people here, they wash the shoes."

"They can't get the grass stains out, L.B. And if you wash the shoes enough, the toes break down. I don't want my dancers spraining their ankles."

"So paint the shoes," Mayer said. "My shoes, I wear for ten years. No more shoes."

Eventually Mayer clamped a gray homburg on his head and strode out, using a side door to his left. I began walking toward Seeberg. He was bent over the table shuffling through pages.

"So we'll throw out scene fifty-eight, here, and just put in a bridge to the zoo scene," he was saying. "Have Jimmy get the pages to me by noon. And we'll need to see some girls in the morning to replace Susan and What's-her-name. Also—"

"Hello," I said.

Both men looked up at once. Seeberg's eyebrows rose briefly and then he frowned. Max gave me a wolfish grin. I gave him one back.

Seeberg cleared his throat impatiently. "I don't have time for more of your games, Miss Chandler. I'm busy."

"This isn't a game, Mr. Seeberg. I need only a minute or two."

"You'll have to wait." Then, "Look, if L.B. is serious about wanting this in the can March first, we're going to have to speed things along. If Jimmy can't do it, I'll put another writer on it, I don't have time to screw around. I've got some ideas we can discuss tomorrow."

Max nodded, picked up a stack of papers and walked out. Seeberg sighed heavily and ran his fingers through his hair. I could feel his eyes running the length of my body.

"It's late," he said finally. "You've picked a bad hour."

"News has no hours."

He was wearing dark blue slacks and a white shirt under a white V-neck sweater. He also wore a deep tan. I wondered if he used a lamp.

"I don't have time. You'll have to go through channels." He began shuffling through some papers on the table.

"I don't think you want me going through channels."

"Yes, well," he said absently.

"I mean do you really want channels knowing you were on the beach the night Anne Bardon was murdered?"

His head came up. "What did you say?"

"You were on the beach the night Anne Bardon was murdered. We really must talk. I'm tired of telling the police I don't know anything."

Seeberg blinked. "The police?"

"Yes. They do that sometimes, investigate murders. They seem to be investigating hers."

He gave me a small tired smile. Then he turned away from me and pointed to a wooden packing crate. The pointing was punctuated by the clink of a gold-link bracelet sliding smoothly from his shirt cuff to the knuckles of his tanned hand. "I'm afraid you'll have to sit on this, if you don't mind."

I walked over behind the table and perched on the crate.

He sat on the edge of the table facing me. With amusement I realized that he had planted me in shadows and himself in the full glow of the overhead lights. A man accustomed to center stage. Or clever enough to make me look into the blinding glare. I opened my purse and pulled out my notebook.

A hand flew up. "Wait. I'm not saying anything until I know what you think you're doing, Paris."

I laid the notebook in my lap. "I've been working on a story about Anne Bardon, as you very well know. You seem to hold the missing pieces."

"Meaning what? She was one of a zillion actresses here." He paused. "I'm sorry she is dead."

"She was murdered, Mr. Seeberg. Shot. A girl you were keeping in a house on Orlando."

He touched his shirt collar. "I often help struggling young actresses."

"You had a date to meet her on the beach the night she was murdered. We can jump right to that scene and skip the back story."

Seeberg watched me silently, looking amused. The lights turned his hair gold and played off of his tan. He had the kind of presence that locked your attention in. I blinked to break out of it.

"Tell me, Paris. Can you act? Dance, sing? I could put you in this picture tomorrow. All of our girls are coming down with the flu."

"I don't act, sing, or take bribes, Mr. Seeberg. I just ask questions."

"Perhaps you've missed your calling."

"I doubt it."

"You might at least consider screenwriting."

"Screenwriters need stories. Tell me yours."

"Why should I?"

"Fair play. I have everybody else's and most of yours. My editors are waiting for the denouement. So are the Santa Monica police. They're harder to put off."

"What do the police know?" he asked sharply.

"They know I know more than they do. I doubt I can hold them off much longer. Keeping secrets wears me out."

"If you're trying to implicate me, you're wasting your time. If you try to imply in your story that I had a relationship with Miss Bardon, I'll have you fired. Does that answer all of your questions?"

I said nothing.

He got off the table, turned his back to me and began shuffling papers. I let him ignore me for a minute. During that moment there was a loud crash somewhere in the building. Then there was silence.

"This is the deal," I said quietly. "You answer my questions and in exchange I will not write about Lauralee and Yvette and Kiki and Carole Hanks. I may even hold back the information that you stash your girls in apartments and houses owned by your wife, though I kind of like the symmetry there. But let's do this quickly, huh, Mr. Seeberg? It's kind of cold in here."

He turned around, holding open a script. I could read the title on the first page. *Unfinished Dance*.

"What I like about this story is that it's about pretension," he said, glancing at me. "About people who cannot accept themselves for what they are and so they try to elevate themselves into something they're not, on the backs of innocent people. And of course, they fail in the end. A story for our times, wouldn't you say?"

"For our city, at any rate."

"Yes, it's easy to slip into delusion here. You're a girl who seems quite practiced at it."

"But not as practiced as you." I opened my notebook and pulled out a pencil. "You deluded Anne into thinking she was going to be a star. You—"

"Anne deluded herself. She was not going to get the part in *Unfinished Dance*. And she knew it. Go ahead, write that down."

"You mean you had Lauralee in mind all along?"

"Lauralee can act. Anne's greatest performances were all off-screen. In front of the camera, she froze."

I smiled. "Those performances must have been something. To keep youi interested for so long."

"She was under contract here. I had to be interested."

He shifted back round to the table and shuffled more papers. I said, "So what kind of performance did she give the night of January seventh?"

"Uh . . . the seventh?"

"The night she was murdered. You had arranged to meet her on the beach."

"Honestly, I don't remember."

"The person who drove her to the beach remembers. I'm sure it won't be that hard to find someone at the party who saw you leave."

That spun Seeberg around. "You say someone drove her to the beach?"

"Mm-hm."

"Well, you're wrong. The truth is, Anne never showed up."

"Tell me more of the truth, it really turns me on."

He stood there for a moment, uncertainly. Then he sat down on the table again.

"Listen," he said heavily, "if Anne did show up, I didn't see her. Yes, we were supposed to meet. But something must have happened. She wasn't there."

"What time was this?"

"Nine-thirty. I left the house a few minutes before. I walked along the beach to our meeting spot, probably took five minutes. I waited maybe another fifteen. Then I went back to the Davises."

"You mean nine o'clock."

"No, nine-thirty. I wanted to be sure we were finished eating."

"And you told her nine-thirty?"

"That's right." He raised his left hand and I caught a flash of gold watch. "Enough?"

"What was the purpose of the meeting?"

"I have no idea. She called me that afternoon and said she had to see me. She was having some kind of crisis. Actresses are always in crisis. Every day they're sure they're another year older." He smiled thinly.

I tapped my pencil on my notebook. "Okay, let's run through this again, Mr. Seeberg. New plot point. The purpose of your meeting was to give Anne money. Ten thousand dollars, I believe."

"What?" said Seeberg, raising his voice. "Who told you that?"

"Maybe Anne did."

"That's ridiculous," he snapped. He stood up. "Why would I give her that kind of money?"

"Gee, I don't know. Why would a man give a pregnant woman ten thousand dollars to go away? You were sending her away, weren't you? I mean, her bags were packed and she had a train ticket to Iowa. Are we on the same page here?"

His eyes flashed angrily. He took a step toward me. I jumped involuntarily as something came crashing down somewhere in the dark cavernous reaches of the sound stage. Seeberg took another step, coming partly into the shadows now.

"I don't like your implications."

"Nobody will."

"The baby had nothing to do with me, sweetheart. Get that straight."

"Who did the baby have something to do with?"

His mouth tightened.

"Henry Tooker?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Really? She was your girlfriend. That was hardly a secret."

There was a footstep. He was standing only three feet away. The footstep I heard was not his. And it couldn't have been Walter's. The phone on the table would have to ring first. With icy fingers, I fished out a cigarette from my purse. Our eyes locked as I lit it. I said, "Look, I'm serious about the police." I snapped the lighter shut. "Who's in here besides us?"

"No one. Workmen. Are you accusing me of murdering Anne? I wouldn't if I were you."

I didn't answer.

He turned on his heel and walked back to the table. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and sat down.

I said, "She was desperate to marry you. Did it cost ten thousand to buy her off?"

He shook his head. "Paris, listen to me. Let's clear something up. I love my wife." He gave a little smile, a guilty smile. "Maybe it seems like I don't sometimes. But a fling now and then never hurt anyone. It's just that my fling with Anne suddenly became, er, complicated."

"Yes, having a wife on the side can be complicated. Not to mention a possible baby, not possibly related to the wife."

"Put that in the paper and you're dead."

"Literally?"

"Uh, sorry." He laughed softly then the smile disappeared. "Professionally."

"Was it your wife's idea to pay her off?"

"Helen had nothing to do with this, not a thing."

"I am trying to imagine you, Mr. Seeberg, sneaking out of a party with ten thousand dollars in your pocket. You're visual. What would that look like?"

"I don't think ten grand fits in your pocket." He seemed amused.

"So you weren't going to pay her the money you promised?"

"I never said I promised her a thing."

He was challenging me. And I had no proof that he had made the payment. Just the circumstantial evidence in Henry Tooker's Chicago bank account. I put the subject on hold. "Why were you having her followed, Mr. Seeberg?"

"What? I wasn't."

"Anne claimed someone was following her. She believed he was sent by you."

"She said that? She never told me." He paused thoughtfully. "Maybe he was her killer."

I grinned. "There. I knew you could fix the story. Nice ending."

"Yes." He stood up. "On that note, I believe we are finished here."

"Sure. I just don't understand why you never went to the police. Never called Iowa. Never lifted a finger to find out what happened to a girl you were involved with for four years. Who was carrying your baby."

"She said."

"Mr. Seeberg, you don't give someone ten thousand dollars to keep her out of a movie."

Something moved deep in the shadows maybe twenty feet behind him. I pulled my jacket closer around me and kept my eye on the phone. "Unless she had something on you, but what? Your wife knew about the affair."

"Pardon my language but go to hell."

"The point is, I don't think you knew whether it was your baby or not. Not even Anne could have known. You wanted that baby born. Which cost you the ten grand. Or would have, if . . ."

"If I hadn't murdered her? Go ahead and print that, Paris. I dare you to."

I swept a strand of hair out of my face.

Seeberg was giving me a hard look. He came closer. At the same time, the shadowy figure in the distance moved. He said softly, "For such a beautiful girl, you're in the wrong racket."

"Oh really."

"Let me start you in the right one."

"I don't work well on my back, Jack."

"Then you haven't had the right working conditions. I'll arrange for them." He smiled. "You might like a nice car."

"You're awfully free with your wife's money."

His face turned an ugly red. "Helen must never be hurt, do you understand? I'm an honorable man. My wife—"

I was scrambling to catch up. "Your wife? Who would hurt your wife?"

He took another step closer. That left two feet to go. "None of this must ever be printed, you got that? If money will buy your silence, I'll take care of you. Whatever you want, a nice house, a car, we'll work it out."

I was still scrambling. He didn't have to talk to me; he had. To find out what I knew, possibly. But whoever had sent the dead bird and led me to Henry Tooker's body already feared what I knew.

. . . And the bribe. It had come awfully late in the game.

"My God," I said. "You think your wife shot her, don't you?"

Seeberg stared at me. "Are you out of your mind?"

But my poking around had struck something, it showed in the uncertainty reflected in his eyes. "Where is your gun?" I said softly. "Do you know?"

He stepped back. "I consider this conversation over. I've been more than generous with my time."

"People know you keep a gun in the car."

"In this day and age, one can't be too careful. You should remember that, Paris. Now, I've had a long day and another to follow tomorrow. You think about what I said. You want money, we'll talk. You want a shot at acting, I'll arrange it."

He came forward, reaching out with his right hand. His finger caught in my hair. "Let me screen-test you," he whispered.

His eyes were warm and smiling.

"Let go of my hair," I said quietly. "Now."

He backed off then, turning away. I felt my breath go out of me. I watched him put his jacket on. "Call me tomorrow, sweetie. We'll talk then."

He collected his script and began walking away with all the authority of a king, the light turning his hair to spun gold as he passed through their favoring rays. I had nothing brilliant to say to make him come back. I watched him disappear through the side door.

There was a clatter. A piece of wood, four feet long, came skittering along the concrete floor. A pair of scuffed brown shoes charged along right behind it.

I blinked quickly. Trying to see what was coming at me through the hot, blinding lights.

33

"You okay, kid?" Walter was breathing hard.

I gathered my jangled nerves and stood up. I could smell the corned beef.

"But how did you get in?"

The guard was supposed to phone. The Nate n' Al's delivery man.

"I scaled a wall." He dropped the paper bag on the table. "Did you get anything, how did it go?" He came around the table, moving fast. I was taken by the look of concern on his face. His jacket open, tie akimbo, his hat crooked on his head. Walter scaling a wall and charging in with his silly stick.

I sighed.

"I can't play ball with the big boys," I said.

Much later that night, after the commotion in the house had uncommoted and Walter had been dispatched, Betty Fox had been packed off in her car by an adoring Bret, and Tee Jones and Mrs. Keyes had finally gone to bed, I sat in the study, wrapped in my pink flannel robe, and figured out where I had messed up.

Which is when Walter's lessons came back to haunt me. I had not gone in with both barrels blazing. Only one. Lauralee had said the meeting was set for nine and that's when she and Anne had arrived; Seeberg had said nine-thirty. I should have known the truth. Instead of rehearsing with Walter all afternoon, I should have been out at the beach doing my homework. Laying in the ammo.

I picked up the sterling-silver picture frame with the broken glass. I stared at my portrait, taken when Russ and I had become engaged. I was wearing a royal-blue cashmere sweater with the strand of cultured pearls he had given me. My eyes looked as deep as the ocean.

Mrs. Keyes had found the smashed portrait propped on the stairs in the front hall late that afternoon.

Someone had entered the house and had taken it off the mantle in the living room. The glass had been shattered, the picture retouched. A knife or a scissors had slashed my neck; a crayon had drawn a blood-red line over the slash mark. The bits of glass had been carefully set back in, the picture placed on the stairs.

It hadn't been Seeberg and it hadn't been Tooker.

I drained my brandy. It was two A.M. I was clean out of ammo.

". . . Your imagination is working overtime and could lead you to a wrong decision."

34

At four-thirty, I awoke with a start. Curled up on my window seat, staring out at the full light of the moon, what had seemed foggy at two now seemed perfectly clear.

If Jack Seeberg had lied about the time, if he had indeed met Anne Bardon on the beach at nine o'clock, then he would have been with her when the gun went off. In that case, he had either pulled the trigger himself or he had seen the person who had. In either case he had chosen to remove himself from the scene by lying about the time. *Question:* Was the murderer his wife?

Addendum. If Seeberg had been correct about the time, and Lauralee had been telling the truth, then Seeberg, had he actually gone to the meeting place, would have seen Anne Bardon's body. In which case, why wouldn't he have called the police, at least anonymously, to report a murder? *Note:* Unless he thought he was protecting his wife.

Which meant . . . she would have left the party, too.

I got up off the window seat and returned to bed. I still hadn't read the rest of Anne Bardon's letters.

"You're up early."

Tee stood in the kitchen door, her hair a tangled mess, tying the belt around a plaid flannel bathrobe. She yawned.

"So are you," I said.

"Yeah, well, I didn't want you runnin' off without me. Is that coffee I smell?"

"Sit. I'll get you a cup." I went over to the stove and filled a cup for Tee from Mrs. Keye's gleaming aluminum pot. I put the cup and saucer on the table in front of her. But I didn't sit down.

"Are you okay?"

"Tired. I didn't sleep very well last night."

She nodded sympathetically. "I don't think I would have either."

"Yeah. Up a lot and thinking." I hesitated. "You, uh, didn't go into my room yesterday, did you?"

"No ma'am. Why?" She began stirring a lump of sugar into her coffee.

"I wanted to finish reading Anne Bardon's letters to Henry Tooker, you know, when I was up in the night. Only they weren't there. On my bedside table. That's where I left them and—"

Tee stopped stirring. "You're saying they're gone?"

"Uh, yeah." I sat down.

"Maybe Mrs. Keyes—"

"Already asked her. She said she dusted around them yesterday morning. They were there when I went to work."

"And not there after someone broke into the house." Tee picked up the pitcher and added cream. "I've never been in your room, Paris."

"Right. Sorry."

"And to make you feel worse, no fingerprints. The card that came with the bird and the letter that Tooker supposedly sent? No prints. And no prints on the paper in his hand, except his. The note about going into Bardon's house was clean, too."

I told Tee about my interview with Seeberg and I told her about his wife. "The thing is, Tee, Mrs. Seeberg was supposedly home all day yesterday and he was on the set. And even if one of them had sent some thug to the house, how would that person have known there was a picture of me in the living room? Unless the person just happened to find it and decided to make an extemporaneous statement. Frankly, I'm frustrated." And scared, I didn't add.

"Uh-huh," said Tee, sipping her coffee.

"Which doesn't even address the subject of Henry Tooker. I suppose Seeberg, if he had killed Anne, could have killed Henry, too. Out of jealousy perhaps. But why would Mrs. Seeberg have?"

Tee put down her cup. "What about Lauralee?"

"Unless Henry knew who killed Anne. Yes, that makes sense. He was killed for what he knew."

"Lauralee might have left the set after you did," Tee reasoned. "Just for a little while."

"Lauralee acted like she thought Jack did it. I emphasize the word 'act.'"

I picked up the front page of the *Examiner*, which I had been reading when Tee came in. "So you haven't read the letters either, huh?"

Tee didn't reply.

"What do you know," I said. "They think a sailor in San Diego killed the Black Dahlia."

Tee drove me to work. "I think I'd better stick with you today," she said as we crawled along Olympic. Traffic was horrendous. "The truth is, I don't think you know what you're doing."

I laughed. "Clever detection. But you'd be wasting your time. I'm supposed to write the Seeberg story, so I'll be in the office, safe and sound. Besides, nobody's laid a hand on me. It's my house that needs protection."

"Mm-hm."

"Or go hang around Mrs. Seeberg." A bus ramrodded itself in front of us. Nobody was on it. "Anne referred to her in both letters that I read, or some her anyway. And Lauralee admitted she told Mrs. Seeberg that Anne was pregnant. If you can imagine that."

"Paris, listen to me. Henry Tooker was shot at point-blank range. By a .30-caliber bullet, same as Anne. There were no signs of a struggle. He was shot where he fell, in the living room. Which means he opened the door for someone he probably knew. How would he know Mrs. Seeberg?"

She breezed through a red light at Hill, and at Broadway turned right. "The money," I said. "Maybe she gave him the money. To get Anne out of town. Seeberg never exactly said he paid her off. Anyway here we are, thanks. Call me if you like." I opened the door.

Tee said, "Oh, I forgot. Nick called last night. Looking for you. He sounded lonely."

I looked at her.

"So I asked him if he'd like to have dinner with me." She flashed a brilliant smile. "I didn't think you'd mind."

I switched on the lights in Society and walked around in a stew. Then I sat down at my desk and began making notes of how I wanted to write my story. I didn't know how. I didn't even know what I had. A girl was dead. A famous Hollywood director had been her boyfriend. He denied seeing her on the night of her murder. I had Lauralee's admission that she drove Anne to the beach and had heard a shot. I had the Henry Tooker angle, how Anne had met him and taken him away from his then girlfriend. Did that matter? What else? Ah. The gray shadow of Mrs. Seeberg over the whole mess, but nothing that could be written. I had one last lead I wanted to pursue.

At nine-thirty, I pursued it. I called the operator for a number. A moment later a phone was ringing in Santa Monica and a woman answered it. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Davis?"

"Speaking." The word was as gentle and refreshing as a breeze off the ocean. Which she was undoubtedly enjoying. "Who's this?"

I told her my name, adding, "I'm with the *Examiner.*"

Her voice grew chilly. "Then you're wasting your time. We already have it delivered."

"That's not why I'm calling."

"My husband insists. He likes the sports section. That Vincent X. Flaherty person. But if you ask me, the paper is a disgrace. Etta Rice traffics in malicious scandal."

The words held a grudge. I didn't know if it was aimed at her husband, or Etta, or the paper itself. I picked up a black crayon. "I'm calling because Helen Seeberg suggested—"

"I mean where does she get off writing that garbage?"

"Er—"

"Nasty, vicious things about nice people who work hard for what they get. It's a crime, really."

But not so criminal, I would bet, that she refrained from reading what Etta wrote. I said, "Mrs. Davis, I'm writing a story about entertaining. I'm calling you—"

"And you can tell that Mr. Hearst I'm sick to death of reading about his Big Red Menace. I mean you have to wonder about a man who protests too much. Maybe someone should look into *his* background!"

"Uh, yeah." But the line had stopped listening. Carefully I replaced the receiver.

I spent ten minutes scrounging through Society looking for a phone book, but the only one that surfaced was from 1944. I drifted over to cityside and found one two years newer. I hocked it and brought it back to my desk. Sighing, I began my tedious inquiries.

On the seventh call, they became less tedious. Celebrity Party Planners in Beverly Hills turned out to be the party I wanted. A guy named Rick said I could drop by any time.

Forty-five minutes later, the bus and I parted company at Olympic and Beverly Drive. It was hot as I walked south along Beverly, and I removed my pink wool suit jacket. Two boys hurtled past me on roller skates, throwing me a bit of their breeze; I wondered if they didn't have the right idea. At Pico, I turned west.

Celebrity Party Planners turned out to be a storefront operation disguised as a bakery. A gray-haired woman behind the counter disappeared through a door into the kitchen. My nose trailed her and picked up the scent of fresh, warm dough. I stared hard at an eclair in the glass case.

"Hi, I'm Rick. Are you the lady on the telephone?"

He was quite large, well over six feet tall and with shoulders. Below the shoulders he carried ample storage area for his baked goods. He was wearing a long white apron over a white shirt and white pants. His tie was yellow with large blue polka dots. Heavy black-rimmed glasses cut semicircles on round ruddy cheeks.

"Yes, I'm Paris Chandler. Perhaps I could sit down and just sniff for a while."

He laughed. "Go ahead and I'll bring you some things to sniff. Coffee?"

I grinned.

He went back into the kitchen. I sat down at one of the wrought-iron ice-cream tables and watched the woman behind the counter lift pies off a metal tray and nudge them into the glass display case. The shop was clean and tidy with simple decor. Frosted-glass lighting fixtures in the shape of saucers hung from the ceiling on narrow metal poles. The walls were cluttered with studio blow-ups of movie stars, the favored decor of most local establishments. It made me feel disappointed in Rick.

A white plate with one chocolate cupcake, a slice of cherry pie, and a pile of assorted cookies appeared under my nose. The coffee and the fork arrived next. Rick slid down the back of his chair, leaned forward and hiked up his pant legs. "Are you part of the Chandler clan? I know most of them. In fact, they helped me get my start."

"They've helped everybody get their start." He gave me a quizzical look. "I was connected. Briefly."

I forked off a small piece of cupcake and one of pie then broke for some coffee. I said, "Rick, these are wonderful. But I haven't come here to hire you."

Behind the glasses, his blue eyes twinkled. "Someone must have given me a heck of a reference."

"I'm with the *Examiner.*"

"Uh-oh."

"And I need a little discreet help."

"It better be discreet. Blabbing is bad for business."

I pushed the plate toward him and he helped himself to a sugar cookie. "You catered a party recently. Something happened at that party that I need to know about. I can't get the guest list. I was hoping one of your people might have seen what I need to know."

"You mean like a bedroom with an unmatched pair in it?"

"No. Someone who might have been at the door who could tell me if and when a certain person left the party and if and when that person returned."

Rick took off his glasses and polished them with the edge of his apron. When he slipped them back on, the twinkle was gone. "You mentioned the Davises on the phone. Is that the party we're talking about?"

"Yes. On January seventh."

"Sure, I remember. But you should talk to her if you want someone who was at the door. She supplies her own housekeeper."

"What did you supply?"

"For her, it's always the same. A cook, a helper, a bartender, and a valet. Sometimes two."

I nodded and sipped the coffee. "The valet would be the one."

"Without using his name? Or my company's?"

"That's right. I only need to verify that someone left and came back."

"Or didn't."

"Which isn't so much to ask, is it?"

I watched him walk away. Then I picked up the fork and gave the cupcake another stab.

The cab driver was one of those local palookas who believes that driving is an ancillary job requirement. "I had a girlfriend once made pies," he was saying, looking me directly in the eye. "Apple with cinnamon topping was her speciality."

I looked down at the two pie boxes in my lap and began to regret that I had bought them.

"She was weird, let me tell you. She—"

"Excuse me. But isn't that a red light?" I inquired.

"Yeah." He turned and braked, pitching me forward. I grabbed the back of the seat with one hand and the pies with the other. "Shirley, that was her name. She was one of those astrological people. She baked like a madwoman when the moon was full."

I had simply thought that riding a bus with two fragrant pies would invite unwanted attention.

The cabbie's eyes refastened themselves to the boxes rocking in my lap.

"You're drifting into the oncoming lane," I pointed out.

"Oh. Sorry. Then there was one other time of the month, I can't remember if it was tide-in or tide-out, when she would bake. Cherry, always cherry." He glanced back. "I said, 'Shirley, you think the planet rulers would mind a little lemon meringue now and then?' Ha ha. And she would—"

"You just went through a stop sign." Suddenly, I felt a surge of love for Bret and a major hate for Rick's pies. Feelings about my mother's ban on driving were mixed in there somewhere. When I found my voice, I said, "Look, buster, you turn around one more time and you're going to be licking pie off your face until Mars aligns with Pluto. Am I making myself clear?"

A startled and hurt silence welled up in the front of the cab.

"If you want, I can run through that again," I said.

* * *

The piece of paper Rick had given me said Willy Mack, AMR Parking, Sixth and Figueroa. I found Willy Mack in the middle of the lot, sitting on a wooden crate beside a dilapidated wooden hut, from which, judging by the cash register and slotted board with parking stubs, the parking-lot business was conducted. Underneath an AMR cap, he was drinking a Coke out of the bottle. I approached him balancing my pie boxes and my suit jacket. Bored brown eyes tilted up at me.

"Hi. Mr. Mack?"

"You want your car, you ask Fred over there. I'm busy."

"Rick from Celebrity Party Planners told me to look you up." I inched closer. "It's about the Davis's party a couple of weeks ago. He said you had a real good memory."

"I'm still busy." He wore navy cotton pants, a white shirt and a bow tie. His wavy black hair glistened with pomade. He was either trying to grow a mustache or he needed to put a fresh blade in his razor.

"Yes, I can see that." I bent over and put the pie boxes on the ground, carefully laying my jacket on top. When I straightened I opened my purse. I took out two dollar bills from a stack that I had carefully laid in there and held them in my hand. "I need only a few minutes of your time."

The little hairs on his upper lip spread. "That's thirty seconds you're holding, lady. What you got in mind that takes thirty seconds?"

The heat of the sun was making me thirsty. I said, "I'd like a Coke if you have one."

"That's it?"

I came up with two more dollars. "And five minutes."

He stood up right away, took two steps into the shack and bent over a metal box. He fished out an icy bottle of Coke, which he pried open using a penknife. We exchanged goods the way countries exchange prisoners of war.

"Mr. Rick, he told me on the phone you wanted to know about someone leaving the party. You give me a good description, I still might not know."

He sat down on the crate.

"The man is named Seeberg. About six feet tall, sandy-colored hair, early forties. Cocky. He would have come out of the house between nine and nine-thirty. He drives a Pierce-

Arrow. I don't know if he took it or set off on foot. He would have been heading south down the beach."

Willy Mack set his Coke bottle on the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Man like that came out with his wife. Black-haired lady?" I nodded. "Yeah, they were having a fight."

"About what?"

"Something . . . let me think." He ran his finger across his mustache as if checking on its growth. "It was like they was arguing and she was fed up. She said she wanted to go home and kept telling me, bring her the car. The man kept saying wait."

"Uh-huh."

"She said she was tired of being held up like a riddle, it was giving her a headache. And he said it was her own fault, why didn't she leave him alone instead of spying on him all the time."

"Held up to ridicule. Is that what she said?"

"Didn't I say that, lady?"

"Er, sorry. Go on."

"And she said she knew he had been with that tart and that's why he had been late to the party."

"He was late? They didn't come together?"

"She come by herself in the Arrow. He got there after everybody else. Somebody dropped him off."

"A woman?"

"No, a man."

"Did she say the name of the tart?"

Willy looked at me. "You're wearing me out, lady."

"Try vitamins. What happened next?"

"So she gets in the car and drives off."

I took a deep breath. "And what did he do, Willy?"

"He walks off, toward the beach, like you said."

"Do you have any idea what time this was?"

"Why should I? I'm supposed to know you're going to ask?"

I sipped my Coke. "All right. How long was he gone? Do you know that?"

"Mmm, a half hour. Maybe more. But when he comes back, I notice." He grinned. "You want to know why I notice?"

I gave him a cool look. "Possibly."

He rubbed his fingers against his thumb. I forked over two more dollars. I wondered how Constance was going to work the expense-account angle on this one.

"He come over to me and ask if there is a hose in the garage. He has blood on his hands and on his sweater. He takes off the sweater and says to burn it. He gave me a sawbuck."

I found myself staring at him. "Blood? Are you positive?"

"Not then I wasn't. It was dark. But after he washed off his hands and went inside, I put the sweater in my car. It was a nice sweater."

"What did you do with it, Willy?"

"I took it home. But when I look at it, then I could see it was dried blood. So I know something screwy had happened. That's when I burned it. I didn't like Mr. Seeberg doing that to me."

"You know him?"

"He comes to the Davises a lot."

I figured my money was good for one more question. "Have you told anybody else what you just told me?"

"Why should I? Nobody asked."

I bent over and retrieved my jacket. "You mustn't mention this to anyone. I'm paying for your silence," I said.

"Yeah? Well you better pay good, lady."

"I am." I pointed to the boxes. "You've got one blueberry, one apple."

I gave him a weary smile. "They nearly cost me my life."

35

Harold Gibbons, managing editor of the *Examiner*, was a bookish gentleman with thinning brown hair, round spectacles, and a wry sense of humor that only rarely stretched to the corners of his mouth. A classics scholar who had failed in his attempts to become a published poet, Mr. Gibbons had the perfect sensibility to oversee the daily operations of a big-city newspaper: Since no one could ever stand as high in his esteem as William Shakespeare, he viewed life as if from the wings, passing cool and ironic judgment on the world around him. The office he occupied reflected his aloofness. It contained a heavy wooden desk, dark wooden shutters, generally pulled tight against the intrusion of downtown L.A., a glass-enclosed bookcase filled with ancient editions of obscure writings, four metal file cabinets, a large wire wastebasket, and a wall calendar from Forest Lawn Cemetery. He dreamed of one day visiting England and stalking the haunts of the famous bard.

The look in his eyes suggested he was already there.

"I say we shoot a photog over right now. She *thinks* the kid was telling the truth. If he isn't, tough. We'll have his mug in the paper, shows we're not making stuff up." Fred Dickinson glanced over at me from the doorway. "You're not making this up, right?"

"No," I said, fidgeting in my chair.

"I want George to talk to Seeberg," said Len Kramer insistently. He was leaning against one of the file cabinets, trying his best to ignore me. "Confront him with the bloody sweater story. She didn't do that."

"I'll go see him," I said quickly. "He told me to call. I'll call."

Len Kramer took a step forward. "Harold, this is George's beat. He'll know how to handle it. She can write the strumpets angle. You got space for that kind of story, Countess?"

Constance McPhee Estevez, dressed in a violet cape dress, and looking as if she lacked only a rhinestone mask to complete The Look, sat in the chair next to me and blushed. "Well it's not normally the kind of story . . . I mean." Mr. Gibbons sat behind his desk and puffed on his pipe. I kept looking over his shoulder through the glass windows into the city room. But Walter wasn't there.

"So why don't I call George at the police station now?" Len was whining. He was always whining, due possibly to a nasal condition. "He can run over to MGM, talk to Seeberg, come back here. She can feed him her notes. Bingo. It's done."

"It's my story," I said.

Mr. Gibbons watched me with interest, as if I were some kind of bird that had suddenly alighted on his windowsill. We had spoken only once before; the day I joined the staff. Fred

Dickinson tipped back his head and drained the coffee from his mug. The mug was chipped.

Constance said, "Of course a nice story about the ingenues would give the section a boost."

"It's not a nice story," I said.

"It's a big story," Len Kramer said, digging into his pants pocket for a handkerchief. "Give her something else to do, Harold." He blew his nose.

"I'll work with Walter Ainsley," I said doggedly.

There was a long, embarrassed silence.

"Walter knows this story," I persisted. "He knows how it should be written."

"Walter's not here today," Fred Dickinson said dismissively. "And I've got to vote with Len. Send George out. I like the harem angle though. Let Paris write that."

He said it as if he were doling out the caption for the weather map. I sighed wearily. "I can't."

All eyes swiveled and fixed themselves on me. "Can't?" demanded Len.

"I told Seeberg I wouldn't if he told me about the night of the murder."

"See what I mean!" groaned Len.

"Work it out with George." Fred turned and walked out.

"I'm late for my lunch at Perino's," Constance added hurriedly. "The mayor's wife." She bolted, too.

Len was reaching for the phone, hung on the side of Mr. Gibbons's desk. "Sweetheart, get me George at Central Division." His fingers played a chord on the desk.

"It's my story," I said to Mr. Gibbons. "I found it. Let me finish it."

Mr. Gibbons puffed on his pipe.

I listened to Len barking instructions to George through angry voices in my head. I wanted to get out of there and call Walter.

Len slammed the phone down. "Okay, he's on his way to MGM. I gave him the goods." His eyes slid reluctantly to me. "When you finish in here, stop by my desk and bring your notebooks."

I realized then how tightly I was gripping the arms of the chair. Silently, I watched him leave. I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves.

"Mr. Gibbons, I didn't ask Seeberg about the blood because I didn't know about it. I should have known, but I didn't. I followed up this morning. I went through a lot of trouble to follow up."

"Ummm." Harold Gibbons took off his glasses and polished them with a handkerchief. "I don't quite understand . . ."

I told him how Anne Bardon walked into the office and the trails I had pursued in her wake. I gave Walter the billing he deserved. "What you've got," I finished, "is the story of a murder, number one, and two, the story of a starlet's life in Hollywood." I paused. I wasn't getting much reaction. "And I don't see why I can't write both. With Walter's help, of course."

Mr. Gibbons lit his pipe. "Walter is not reliable." He looked at me uncomfortably.

"I know that. I mean I know he has problems. But he's been pretty reliable with me."

That produced another look of interest followed by a round of puff-puffing. "I don't suppose you know what happened last night," he said mildly.

I shook my head.

"The police hauled him out of Thirsty Eddie's at one A.M. Apparently he had wrecked the place." He paused. "We bailed him out this morning."

"Where is he now?" I asked anxiously.

Mr. Gibbons looked at me blankly, as if his knowledge of the world could not possibly extend to the drunk tank. "We've given him two weeks to dry out," he said conclusively.

"Walter needs help. You can't just leave him on his own."

"We're not a babysitting operation." He looked at me sternly.

"He's a decorated veteran."

Mr. Gibbons smiled faintly. "The war is over." He reached for his lighter and went through the process of firing up his pipe again. "Your notes, I suppose . . . ?"

"Yes," I supplied unhelpfully.

Mr. Gibbons nodded. "All right." He puffed. Through his teeth he said, "I'm going to pull George off the Dahlia murder for half a day, let him handle the Seeberg angle on, uh, this other murder. I want you to do the girl's story. We'll run it Sunday in Society."

I said nothing.

"And, Paris. I'll want to see your story before it goes to the desk. You know how Mr. Hearst is about printing, er, innuendo."

"This isn't innuendo," I said. "It's female slavery."

A small smile crept across his face. But it ducked quickly back inside, as if it weren't quite comfortable having made a public appearance. "We'll talk."

The pipe went into the ashtray. His phone rang. I sat in the chair looking at him, holding back my fury.

Society was out to lunch. I called Walter's apartment; no answer. They were not going to confiscate my notebooks. A garden sprouted on a sheet of copy paper, wild, black flowers bursting onto the page in reckless profusion. I phoned the house and got Tee on the line. "What's happening?" I said.

"Don't ask. The Princess and Mrs. Keyes are in the kitchen whipping up a lunch for a king. The King has just arisen. He's due at the studio at three."

"The Princess?" I repeated.

"That's what Bret's calling her now. Princess Elizabeth. The garage is Buckingham Palace."

"Oh dear." I hesitated. "Do you suppose she's moved in?"

"I was wondering the same thing. She's beginning to get on my nerves, walking around like she owns the joint."

I drew a queen of spades, an ugly one. "Tee, let me ask you something—about guns."

"Shoot," said Tee, "as they say."

"If someone gets shot in the chest with one bullet, would a lot of blood spatter?"

"Depends on the bullet."

"A .32-caliber bullet. Like the one that killed Anne Bardon."

"No spatter," said Tee quickly. "The blood would seep. If it isn't a direct hit to the heart, it takes a while to die. Why?"

"Tell you later."

I crumpled up the garden, picked up my purse and went out. There was a lunch spot down the street, all the spaghetti you could eat for a quarter. But once I got there and saw the tomato sauce, I decided I wasn't hungry. At any price. I walked around the block instead.

* * *

A message was propped up on my typewriter. *Call Jack Seeberg.*

A sexy, female voice answered his phone and breathed, "Mr. Seeberg's on the set. Message?"

I told her my name and that I was returning his call.

"Oh." A pause. Then, "Is there somewhere Mr. Seeberg can reach you?"

A red crayon had scrawled Nick Goodwin, Nicholas, and Nicky on a scrap of paper. I said, "The number is Richmond 1212. I'll be here." I hung up.

I hadn't seen Nick in four days.

I was into the third page of my story, but I was having trouble concentrating. I kept trying to connect facts, like dots in a coloring book, but I still wasn't getting the picture.

Henry took the money and ran. Both Seebergs left the party. He had blood on his sweater. Anne kept referring to "her in the letters to Henry." Yvette was spooked, Lauralee . . . frightened. Lauralee . . . could have got out of the car, followed Anne and shot her, could she not? Lauralee had told Mrs. S.

I picked up a crayon and scribbled some more. Lauralee and Yvette think Jack did it. Yes? Jack thinks his wife did. Question mark, question mark.

Which is when the phone rang.

"Mr. Seeberg calling," breathed the breathy voice, just as George Healy came steaming up to my desk.

"Are you Chandler? Healy. I need your notes."

I held up a finger.

"Look, Paris, what the hell is going on?"

I told Seeberg to hang on. I looked up at George. He was a young man with jaunty red suspenders and a cigar sticking out of his mouth. There was a spatter of freckles on his nose. He held out his hand and snapped his fingers. "Hurry it up, doll. You can call your boyfriend back."

"I'll come over to see you when I finish this call," I said evenly.

"You'll finish it now." Healy took the cigar out of his mouth and grinned as he slowly lowered a finger to the disconnect button.

I slapped his hand away. "Beat it."

The smile faded. "You've got ten seconds, sister. I'm on deadline."

I stood up and turned my back to him. "Sorry. Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Who the hell is George Healy?"

"Er, I think a guy who works here, why?"

"He tried to get in to see me. He claimed he was writing something about Anne. Is the whole paper writing about Anne? Why is everybody talking to me? I've a film to get done."

Behind my back, I could hear Healy shuffling through the stuff on my desk.

"And what was that thing in Etta Rice's column supposed to mean? Everybody's talking about *that*. This harassment has got to stop."

I turned to Healy. "The notebooks are in my car, across the street. Ask Tony in the lot to get them." Healy glared at me and stormed off. I sighed. "Did you speak with George?" I said to Seeberg.

"Of course not. I'm trying to direct a movie, doesn't anyone understand that?"

I smiled and sat down. "There's something I must ask you," I said softly. "Just a clarification, okay? You told me you went down to the beach to meet Anne but she wasn't there, remember?"

He sighed heavily. "Yes. That's what I said."

"Perhaps what you meant was that she wasn't alive."

There was silence.

"She was there, Jack, she must have been. I mean I can't think where else the blood would have come from. The blood on the sweater you gave to the valet to burn. Is any of this ringing a bell?"

I had a pencil in my hand now. I was going to write down every word he said. He said, "Christ."

"All I can do is speculate. Theory number one. When you arrived at the house, you could have gone to your car, which your wife drove, and removed the gun from the glove compartment. You could have brought it into the house and hidden it somewhere. I suppose."

"This is insane."

"Theory number two. Your wife, who left the party when you went out to meet Anne, could have beaten you to the rendezvous and shot her, leaving you to find the body. I hope you're not going to hang up, Jack. I really need to get this straight. You saw the body and you . . . I don't know what. Maybe you checked to see if she was alive. But you came away with her blood. You washed your hands on the hose and gave the valet ten dollars to get rid of your sweater."

I paused. "He didn't get rid of it, Jack."

"Jesus Christ."

"Now the only way I can account for the blood if you shot her, was that she fell against you. Because a .32-caliber bullet, according to someone I spoke to, wouldn't cause a big spurt. The blood just slowly leaks out."

"My God, Paris."

"Also, if you went down to the beach with the gun, intending to shoot her, and, well why else would you have brought the gun? But listen, Jack. What happened to the gun? Did you bury it in the sand? And if you did, how come you didn't bury your sweater, too? And wash your hands in the ocean. But then, I'm only speculating you see."

"Look . . . it wasn't like that. She was . . . I can't talk now, I just can't."

"When?"

"I'll call you back," he said, and hung up.

When George Healy came charging in a few moments later, bellowing there was no car—where were the blankety-blank notebooks?—I smiled sweetly and sighed, "Chauffeurs."

"What?" he bawled.

"You can't rely on them, George. Take it from me."

I kept seeing her face. Red smudged lips chiseled into a slab of stone. *She was a million-dollar baby.* And the tag on the red-painted toenail. *In a five-and-ten-cent store.* Using men the way they used her. In this town where if you don't use, you're dead. Only she died anyway. *In a five-and-ten-cent store.* Seeing that face. Wide-eyed, surprised. It was ten after four.

The phone rang.

* * *

Dayton Way runs parallel to Wilshire on the north, then, just past Rodeo, bends south and meets Wilshire at a major rush-hour jam-up. I knew the studio. I had been hauled in there as a child for ballet lessons. Just past the Rodeo intersection, I climbed out of the cab and, remembering those days, turned up the alley that ran from Wilshire to the studio's back door.

According to Sadie, the *Examiner* switchboard operator, the special delivery letter had arrived while I was out walking at lunchtime and she hadn't seen me come back in. And then she had been busy, etc., etc. Could I come down and get it?

The envelope was thick and creamy. My name had been printed in dark blue ink, the way they do it when they want to invite you to an important premiere. At the stairs, I had opened the heavy sheet of notepaper, folded in half.

"Dear Paris. There is something I must tell you. Please meet me at Guy Van Gelder's studio, Dayton Way, at five o'clock this afternoon. Very truly yours, Helen Seeberg."

I said, "Sadie.?"

The letter had been delivered "by hand," dropped off at the switchboard in the corner of the lobby by a man, Sadie had said, "Not a well-dressed man. Like one of *those* men." And she had glanced at the glass doors that opened onto Broadway.

"That's odd."

No, Sadie had said, it happened all the time. People can't find a place to park so they give a fella a dime to bring something in.

Dusk had fallen and the streetlamps were on, but the orbs of light didn't carry into the alley, and she must have been waiting for me in the shadows somewhere. She called, "Paris!" And I stopped. And the next thing I knew there was a sharp retort and something sent me flying to the ground.

Footsteps hurried away.

Then—"Oh dear. Are you okay?"

I was sprawled on one knee, hands scraped from breaking the fall, shaking. A reflex had sent me down. A bright flash, something whizzing past my ear. There was no mistaking the sound. Lauralee Hart had been right. A gun sounded like a gun.

A worried-looking woman with a shopping bag was bending over me. "Oh, your poor knee. Can I help you up? What a nasty spill."

I took her hand and got slowly to my feet. The heel on my right pump had broken off. She reached down for it and handed it to me.

"Thank you," I said. "How clumsy. I . . . were you . . . behind me?"

"Not directly. I was just turning into the alley and saw you. I was across the street in Magnin's and was cutting through to my car." She hesitated. "Are you sure you're all right? Do you need a lift?"

"I'm going into the studio, but thank you so much."

"You'd think they'd put some lights in here. I'm sorry about your shoe."

I thanked her again at the back door and hobbled inside.

I stood there for a moment trying to breathe normally. But my heart continued to pound. I bent over and examined my bloody knee and the torn stocking and wondered if she would be crazy enough to take another shot in here. I straightened. Down the hall to the left, I knew, was the changing room. Up five stairs in front of me was a lounge area with a classroom on either side. To the right was a door marked "Staff."

I was just about to go up when the door to the changing room opened and Lauralee Hart came strolling out. She had a long cotton skirt over her leotard, and sweater sleeves tied around her neck. She was carrying a grip.

"Oh," she said in confusion. "It's you."

"Hello. I'm surprised, too. I thought you'd be on the set."

Even in the dim light, I could see that her cheeks were flushed. And she had on loafers, which made footstep sounds on pavement.

She tossed her head. "I wasn't in the scene they shot today. What are you doing here?"

She could easily have raced around to the front door, come down the stairs and gone into the changing room. Just as she might easily have got out of her car that night and shot Anne Bardon on the beach. I said as calmly as I could, "Have you seen Mrs. Seeberg? I was hoping to find her here."

Lauralee blinked. "Why, yes. But she's left. She left, I don't know, fifteen minutes ago." She frowned. "What happened to you?"

I held up my broken heel. "Took a spill."

"I'm sorry." Her face revealed nothing. I gave it another chance.

"I hate to ask, but could you drop me off? I live only a few minutes from here, if you don't mind."

Lauralee said she didn't mind. Lauralee asked directions to my house. If she were playing a part, she had rehearsed it well. She waved so long and drove off.

I watched the taillights fade, and wondered if the bullet was supposed to miss.

36

FILM DIRECTOR WITNESSES STARLET MURDER.

That's what the front-page headline said.

> *Jack Seeberg, a director at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, told the* Examiner *in an exclusive interview yesterday afternoon that he was present when contract player Anne Bardon was shot to death on the beach in Santa Monica two and a half weeks ago. He identified the gunman as Henry Tooker, a trumpet player at Mocambo, who allegedly was Bardon's boyfriend and who was found murdered in his West Hollywood home earlier this week.*

The story went on to give a murky account of how Bardon had phoned Seeberg the day she was shot, sounding upset and asking to meet with him. Given his schedule, Seeberg explained, he told Bardon to meet him on the beach nearby the home of Graham and Astrid Davis, where he was dining that evening.

> *"When I got to the beach, Anne was there with her boyfriend and they were quarreling," Seeberg said. "I tried to intervene. But suddenly he pulled out a gun and shot her. And then he ran."*

I tossed the paper onto my desk. I had read the story through already, at home. Seething then, still stewing now. Nobody from the office had bothered to phone me with the news, not that anybody would have thought to. George Healy be damned.

I sat at my desk and continued to brood. Either Healy had gone back to MGM, or Seeberg, fearful of what I had said to him on the phone, got hold of Healy and spun his yarn. I had tried Seeberg that evening, after Lauralee had dropped me off and after I had my wits about me. But no one answered the numbers at the studio; no one answered at his house. Eventually, I phoned the paper for messages. But Jack Seeberg had never called back.

Now I knew why.

I stewed some more. Walter was nowhere to be found, still. And Harold Gibbons hadn't come in yet.

"So, Chandler, did you see the story?"

Len Kramer's bulky presence parked itself in front of my desk.

Darkly, I said I had.

"Nice piece of work George did, don't you think?"

Yes, I said, it was.

"By the way, we killed the Anne Bardon feature last night. I don't know if anyone told you."

I just looked at him and his smug little smile.

"Yeah, nobody's gonna care about her now. And anyway, stuff is breaking on the Dahlia case." He tapped my desk with a meaty finger. "Important stuff." He started to turn away.

"Len," I said, as indifferently as I could. "Did Seeberg ask you not to run the Anne Bardon piece? I mean, well, I suppose that's how these things work?"

He gave me a long, hard look. In the silence that followed, I could hear the wire machines rat-tat-tatting off in the newsroom. I kept my eyes on his. "Healy knows what to do," he said finally. "It's not your concern anymore."

Walter Ainsley lived in an apartment house on Grand near Third Street, not far from the paper. It was a nice-looking three-story stucco building with well-tended bayberry shrubs running around its perimeter.

The mailbox in the foyer said Ainsley, 2A.

I had no idea if he was home. Before leaving the office, I had called the V.A. Hospital, hoping he would have checked himself in. The veterans' program for alcoholics had been getting plenty of publicity, as had numerous theories by doctors on why some vets were still having problems readjusting. But Walter had not turned up. I dug his address out of the phone book.

I climbed a flight of stairs and banged on the door. No one answered and no sounds came through. I pulled out the notebook I had brought with me and began to scribble.

The door creaked open.

A rumpled, bleary-eyed Walter tilted wearily against it. His shirt, wrinkled and stained, hung open over a white T-shirt. The belt on his brown trousers was unfastened. His feet were bare.

"Hello, Walter."

"Yeah, hi."

I hesitated. "May I come in?"

"I ain't exactly receiving company at the moment." He ran a finger across the stubble on his chin. "Maybe later." He started to close the door.

"I need to talk to you now. Let me in."

The door stayed put. We stared at each other through the crack. "Please," I said.

The door swung back. "Welcome to Xanadu," Walter said.

I suppose I had expected an indoor version of skid row, shades drawn, junk all over the place. But that's not how Walter lived at all. I was standing in a sunny room, white blinds opened, walls painted a pale yellow, the wooden floor swept clean. There were shelves with books neatly aligned, magazines stacked. The desk held an old Royal and a tomato can filled with sharpened pencils. A square pink eraser and a letter opener also sat on the desk, along with a picture in a metal frame.

Across the room a soiled sheet was crumpled on the couch. And the coffee table was littered with empty bottles and ashtrays spilling over with cigarette butts. Walter, apparently, abided by his own zoning laws.

I walked over to the desk and studied the photograph in the metal frame. A long-haired girl was grinning jauntily at the camera from beneath a large straw hat. I held up the frame. "Who is this?"

"Nobody. Have a seat. The butler just went out for the hors d'oeuvres."

I replaced the picture and sat down in an armchair by one of the windows. "Did you see the paper today?"

Walter was squinting at me. "Screw the paper." He sat down on the couch. "'Scuse me."

"Seeberg talked to George Healy. They played it on the front page."

"Kid, I could really care." Walter stuck a Camel in his mouth and tried to light it with a match. His hands were shaking. It took him three matches.

"Yeah, me either." He was still squinting, looking pained. I got up and closed the blinds behind me. "How are you feeling?"

Walter burped. "Fit as a fiddle. Don't you have a tea party to go to?"

"Soon."

I opened my purse and found a cigarette. "I called the V.A. this morning, looking for you. You weren't answering your phone."

"Some people might take that to mean I don't want company," Walter said pointedly.

"I want to take you over there. They can help."

"Isn't that nice? First you're Lois Lane. Now you're Florence Nightingale." He grabbed a bottle of bourbon and took a hefty swig.

"I don't mean to intrude."

"Then scram."

"But I can't help it, Walter. This is . . . stupid."

"Thank you, Sister of Mercy."

I decided to try another tack. I said, "George Healy wrote the wrong story. Nothing—"

"I don't give a damn about George Healy," Walter said angrily, taking another drink. "So beat it."

I got up and walked over to him. I grabbed the bottle out of his unsuspecting hand and marched into the kitchen. I dumped the bourbon in the sink. Empty bottles were everywhere. I began opening cabinets, looking for the full ones. I found two and poured them out. I began pulling bottles of beer out of the refrigerator. I bashed them against the sink until the necks broke, glass and beer flying. After a while I calmed down and I stopped. And then I saw that Walter was standing in the doorway watching me.

"You going to take my money, too, Paris?"

I ran my wet hands down the sides of my wool skirt. "He sold me out, Walter. He told Seeberg if he would talk to him, he would keep my Anne Bardon story out of the paper. At least I think he did. Healy is a slick, fast-talking snake. You'd have gotten it right, I want to get it right."

"I got money in the bank, too. Believe it or not."

"He said Tooker shot Anne. A man sees his girlfriend shot to death and he just goes back to a party? How come he didn't call the police? And why aren't the police wondering who killed Tooker?"

"I got aspirin in the medicine cabinet in case you want to smash more bottles."

"And while Seeberg is spilling his guts at MGM, somebody takes a shot at me. Really, Walter. Somebody shot at me. Yesterday afternoon."

"You should find a better class of friends."

"In Beverly Hills. Someone set me up."

"And it used to be a nice neighborhood, too."

Walter walked over to the refrigerator. The door was still open. He gazed inside, then closed the door. "The one thing I don't seem to have are handcuffs. You're serious about this, you should have handcuffs. Though they've had some luck with straitjackets, I hear. But if you don't mind, I'd prefer the cuffs. You got any cuffs?"

"No," I said, holding back the tears.

Walter turned and walked out of the kitchen. A minute later I heard a door slam.

I cleaned up the glass in the sink and rinsed my hands off and wiped them on a towel I found wadded up on the counter. Under the towel lay an *Examiner*. It was two days old.

". . . You are now torn between a conservative and a challenging approach to romance."

37

I didn't want company.

I gave Bret the weekend off, clearing the house of him and Betty. Mrs. Keyes went away with her sister as usual. But Tee refused to budge.

Friday night we made hamburgers, after which she helped me work on my poker game. Saturday, I went to the library and spent the afternoon reading, among other things, "National Planning for Psychiatric Rehabilitation," from the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,* little of which I understood, and Elizabeth Wickenden's, "The Veteran Comes Home: A Summary of Existing Plans and Programs for Readjustment," in another journal. Just before the library closed, I checked out Dixon Wecter's book, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home,* and a copy of *The Egg and I,* which, given its popularity, I was lucky to snare. I spent the evening reading in the study while Tee wrote letters in the kitchen, to whom I did not know, her .32 automatic on the table, loaded and ready to go.

Sunday, she dragged me out to see *Till the Clouds Roll By,* which, if I had to see anything, was at least a cheerful interlude. But even Sinatra singing "Ol' Man River" didn't quite do the trick. On the way home, she suggested we stop and pick up Chinese food. Which is when, for some reason, the black mood snapped.

"Don't you have a card game tonight? I thought they played every week," I said as Tee tooled along Hollywood Boulevard.

"Almost every week. But Gardiner Folkes is having his house redone, or something. At the last minute he tells us.

And we couldn't figure where else to go." She grinned. "Maybe I should have invited them over to your place."

At La Brea we turned and headed down to Sunset. Tee switched on the radio. I watched the street lamps go by.

". . . *I'm wild again, beguiled again, a simpering, whimpering child again. Bewitched, bothered and* . . ."

"I haven't heard from him in a week."

"Call him," said Tee. "He's probably finishing up at the paper. We could invite him to join us."

The lights were coming on in the houses along Sunset. I wondered what Nick did with himself at night, if ever he spent one alone.

". . . *Couldn't sleep, wouldn't sleep. When love came and told me I shouldn't sleep. Bewitched* . . ."

"Want to?" Tee said.

"I wouldn't know what to say to him," I said.

Monday Bret was back in the saddle, and so was I. On the way to the paper, I had him stop by Walter's apartment. Inside a large manila envelope was the Dixon Wecter book, plus some handouts from the V.A. I had collected. At the hospital, I had asked if they could send someone round to talk to Walter, but they said they could only hope to help people who wanted to be helped. I stuck a note in the envelope with the meaningless words, "From a friend who cares about you," and with a feeling of futility left the parcel in the foyer for him.

"I don't know why you bother with that man," Bret said scornfully as we pulled away.

To which I said nothing. I seemed attracted to hopeless causes. Futile crime stories, a self-destructing vet, and a starry-eyed Romeo whose house of cards had collapsed—

"Turn around," I said then. "We've got another stop."

I rang the door bell and glanced uncertainly up at the two-story mansion, wondering too late if I should have phoned ahead first. A gray-paneled truck in the drive said HIGGINS' PAINTING AND PLASTERING. I could hear pounding inside.

"Good morning, mum."

A water woman with a British accent and pinched mouth stood on the threshhold, her gray hair pulled severely back in a bun. She was wearing a white cardigan over a black cotton dress, white stockings, and white polished tie shoes.

"Good morning," I said. "Is Mr. Folkes at home? My name is Paris Chandler. It's, uh, personal."

Why he should be home, it suddenly occurred to me, didn't make much sense. A dentist on a Monday.

"Is it an appointment you want?" the woman inquired, her mouth still pinched. "I can give you a number to call."

"No. It's about the card game." There was more hammering. "I just he thought he might be here."

"One moment please." She started to close the door. Then, "You might as well come in."

The entry hall was carpeted with thick beige wool. On a wall over a table hung a large mirror. Whatever redecorating was being done, it hadn't encroached on the foyer.

"Yes, hello," said a man with gray hair and a small bristle mustache. "Miss, er, Chandler, is it?"

I said it was.

"Washburn told me you wanted to see me about the, er, card game?"

I could see why Gardiner Folkes had hired Miss Washburn. They looked alike. He, too, was tall with the same pale, insubstantial look about him. Less a dentist, especially a dentist to The Stars, he looked like a clerk who lacked only a green eyeshade.

"I'm here on behalf of one of the players," I began. "Nick Goodwin. I'm here to deliver this."

I opened my handbag and took out an envelope. I handed it to Folkes. He gave me a quizzical look and just stood there holding it.

"It's a money order," I said. "To wipe out his debt. You must never allow him to play again."

Folkes held the envelope uncertainly. "He told you to deliver this?"

"Thirty-one-hundred dollars. Is that right?"

"Well—I'd have to check."

"Excuse me, sir."

A man in white overalls stuck his head into the foyer. "I was wondering if you'd come take a look. We've started to paint and we want to make sure the color is right."

"Yes, of course. Excuse me, Miss Chandler."

Folkes dropped the envelope on the hall table and followed the painter through an archway. Curious to see a bit of the house, I followed. The archway led into the living room. To the left, through another archway, came the dining room. It was a large, formal dining room. A long, rectangular table, big enough to seat sixteen, was covered with a drop cloth. The draperies had been taken down from the windows and a chandelier wrapped in plastic sat on the floor. A man on a ladder was plastering the ceiling. Folkes was standing off to the side studying a patch of deep green paint.

"That's fine, don't you think?"

I stood in the archway while he finished consulting the painter. When he turned back and saw me, I said, "It's a beautiful room. You have a lovely house."

"Thank you. Er—about the check."

I handed him a slip of paper. "My name and phone number at the *Examiner*. If there is some question about the amount. But as I said, Mr. Folkes, Nick must never be allowed here again. You took advantage of him. He has no money for games like this. Etta Rice would be very interested to know that you use this game to fleece young men without means." I smiled. "I work for Etta Rice."

Gardiner Folkes grew even paler. He opened his mouth to speak. But I was already into the living room, heading out.

I slipped into the backseat of the Bentley. Feeling better. It had been a long time since I had made the right move.

Or thought I had.

I got home that night to find a full house.

Tee and Betty were standing at the stove cooking something, pots and pans and bowls everywhere, while Bret and Mrs. Keyes sat at the table and watched. I decided there was something wrong with this picture. I said a breezy hello and went down the hall to the study.

Until the arrival of Betty—that is, the Princess, as Bret was indeed calling her—his sojourns into the house were rare. Now he acted like he owned it. Which was not to dismiss the presence of Tee, who seemed to have permanently moved in. I put some logs on the grate and struck a match, but once the fire was going, I lost interest and went out.

I picked up the phone in the hall and dialed Nick's number. For once, he actually answered. I asked him what he was doing.

"Listening to the news. And seeing if this frozen-dinner thing works."

"You bought one? What does it do?"

"It sits in the oven for twenty-five minutes. You sit and watch it. It . . . gives men something to do."

I glanced toward the kitchen. "I could suggest a party. There seems to be one going on here." I paused. "We could crash it."

Suddenly, from over the line, came a loud clattering. Then, a sheepish, "I forgot to turn the oven on."

"If the oven's on, it won't be a frozen dinner anymore. I think this is too hard for you."

"Right," said Nick cheerfully. "I need help. How about frozen dinner for two and a bottle of wine?"

"I thought you'd never ask." I said.

Nick lived in a U-shaped apartment house on Wilshire not far from the university campus. He occupied a flat on the ground floor facing the boulevard. The living room was done in that sort of pathetic bachelor brown that begged for female renovation. A page of script was sticking out of a typewriter on a card table in one corner, logs were blazing in the fireplace, and Nick was collecting newspapers and magazines from the couch to give me a place to sit.

Frank Sinatra was crooning "I'll Be Seeing You" with the Tommy Dorsey band. It made me feel sad.

"I lied about the wine," said Nick, turning the volume down. "But I know you like sherry. I do have a bottle of that."

"Perfect." He was wearing pleated gray trousers, a white shirt, and a gray V-neck cardigan. The cuffs of his shirt were turned back over the cuffs of his sweater. As usual, he was looking the part, even though he didn't have it yet. But if clothes made the man, he would soon. He was like a set, waiting for a play to happen.

Nick came out of the kitchen with two glasses of sherry, handed me one and went over to change the record.

He turned. "Glenn Miller?"

"Betty Fox is always playing Glenn Miller. Or Bret is.

Those people have taken over my house." I paused. "Do you have any Billie Holiday?"

Nick smiled and put on my favorite—"I Don't Want to Cry." He sat on the couch beside me and raised his glass. "To . . . ?"

"Good friends, better times. And—cooked dinners."

He laughed and clinked my glass. "Cheers. So what's new? I read Healy's story. I heard what happened."

"Did you? From who?"

"I spoke to Tee. You must feel bad."

"When did you talk to her—I didn't know."

"Over the weekend. Saturday, I think. Yes, she came by Etta's to say hello. Things were slow."

I sipped the sherry.

Nick said, "Are you hungry?"

"Not yet. Let's talk first."

The record ended. He started to get up to put on another. I touched his elbow. "No, just sit."

I took out a cigarette and held it for him to light. "I don't know how to say this exactly. But I did something today. I hope you won't be angry."

He looked at me with surprise. "What? I won't be. What did you do?"

"I went to see Gardiner Folkes. At his house." I smiled self-consciously. "I guess dentists don't keep office hours when they're redecorating."

"What do you mean?"

"He's redoing something. The dining room. Didn't Tee tell you?" I put down the sherry glass. "What does she tell you?"

Nick's eyes were sparkling. "So you went there? What did you find out?"

"Nothing. I went to pay him off." I looked away from Nick then and at the blue flames dancing on the logs. "I gave him a check for thirty-one-hundred dollars. You're free and clear now."

"What?"

"Nicky, I found out. Don't be mad. I want to talk about this."

Nick's glass hit the table and wobbled precariously, sending a few drops of sherry flying. "Tee told you? I can't believe Tee told you. This is none of your business, Paris. You have no right—" He was on his feet now, really seething.

"Tee didn't tell me. I have a friend who is an assistant D.A. Don't look at me like that. I went to him because you told me the D.A. was looking into it. My friend gave me a list, which I suspect was supplied by Tee. Your name was on it." I hesitated. "And the amount."

"How could you do this to me?" said Nick furiously. "You didn't even tell me. I don't need your help."

"Well you did before. You asked me to look into the cheating thing, remember? As a friend. Now suddenly I can't be your friend. You have funny rules."

"And you have funny ideas about friendship. Doing something behind my back like this. The last thing I need is your goddam money."

Nick walked over to the fireplace. He grabbed a poker and jabbed at the burning logs. Sparks flew up.

Gently I said, "How were you going to pay them, Nick? That's almost a year's salary you owed. What were you thinking when you went there to play?"

"I didn't go there to play. Exactly."

"I see."

He turned back around. He was still holding the poker. "I went there to investigate. I mean, I had been invited to play by—someone. By Martin Grilling, if you must know. So I went once or twice. Then I heard talk about cheating. I thought I could find out." He shoved the poker back in the holder. "I'm a fairly good player."

"Why didn't you just leave it to Tee?"

"She wasn't there then. She came after."

"After you wrote a letter to the D.A."

Nick swallowed the last of his sherry and disappeared into the kitchen. After a while he came back with the bottle. He refilled his glass and set the bottle down. "I had it all worked out," he said stiffly. "I was going to try to sell a script. I'm almost done with it and—"

"That's a really good solution. The money is due next week."

"I was going to ask for an extension," he said defensively.

"You think it works like that? I'm surprised they gave you this much time. Those people, they ruin careers."

"There was a guy I was going to talk to about a loan. It's still none of your business."

"So the loan came from me. You'll pay me back. I intended for you to pay me back. What's the difference?"

"I didn't want any money from you." He was still sore.

He went over and put another log on the fire. It crackled and burst into flames. But it did nothing to warm up the room.

I stubbed out my cigarette and stood up. "I guess this is the part of the story where I leave."

I could see his shoulders tense, but he wouldn't turn and look at me.

"Let's see. I grab my purse, I walk to the door. I reach for the knob. Then maybe I say a clever line just before I go out, slamming the door behind me."

He still didn't turn around.

"But if I did that, I'd only have to come back and knock on your door, Nicky. Because you see, I sent Bret home. And I'm going to have to ask you to drive me."

". . . You'll be invited to a social affair and you'll realize, 'I'm getting very popular!'"

38

"You have no idea how thrilled he is," said Tee shaking cornflakes into a bowl.

The Soviets were charging that the Americans and the British had launched a full-scale attack against the Nazis only when they realized the Russians could defeat the Germans single-handedly. I yawned and turned the page.

"He was so funny. He tried to go up to your room but Mrs. Keyes blocked the stairs. I mean physically held him off."

I glanced at Tee and at her raised eyebrow. I turned to Etta's column. ". . . Jane Russell and Bob Waterfield are giving lie to the separation rumors by cooing together in a lot of corners. Can it be true that Jane really said: 'A dumb girl counts on her fingers—a smart one on her legs'?"

"Hm?" I said. I put down the paper and looked up at the wall clock. Three minutes till eight. I never spoke before eight, unless I absolutely had to. I had come down early, partly out of starvation and partly to address Tee. I wanted to let her know, as nicely as possible, that it was time she cleared out of here. But she had come down before I was coherent enough to say so.

"He wanted to thank you. Wake up." Tee grinned.

"I thought he wanted to kill me." I sipped my coffee. "Am I missing something here?"

Tee emptied the rest of the milk into her cereal. "Does the milkman come today?"

"Why did Nick want to thank me?" I persisted.

"Because it suddenly all clicked. I don't know why I didn't think of it myself. If you hadn't grumped up to bed—"

"The door to the study was closed." I stood up and went to pour more coffee.

"Noise from the kitchen," said Tee breezily. "Do you want to hear this or not?"

I was rooting through the cabinets looking for cookies. "I'm holding my breath," I said petulantly. Mrs. Keyes was always hiding the cookies.

"So when Nick told me about your going over there and the work in the dining room, it rang a bell."

"Ring it for me." I found a fresh bag of devil-food cookies under the sink behind the laundry detergent.

Tee spooned some of the cereal into her mouth and made a loud crunching noise. "Gardiner had these little inset lights in the ceiling. They were low wattage bulbs, but together they threw a comfortable light on the table. You sit there for six hours, your eyes get strained. So the lighting is important."

"This is fascinating, Tee." I yawned.

"That's one of the reasons we like to play there. Comfy arm chairs, big sandwiches, and—good lighting."

"So much for your good lighting," I said. "The ceiling was being plastered over. There was a new chandelier on the floor."

"Now the thing is," said Tee eagerly, "and maybe I only noticed it because I'm a good observer, there was always one little light that had burned out."

"Maybe he got tired of replacing the bulbs." I stuffed a cookie into my mouth.

"Paris, they were peepholes. He had someone upstairs looking down. Gardiner always smoothly suggested where people sit. I don't know how the peeper signaled, but somehow he was signaling to someone in the game."

I sat up straight. "And he must have found out the D.A. was—"

"Exactly." Tee pushed the bowl away. "So, listen. Nick and I didn't have that conversation last night. In your study. I know nothing about anything. At least for a few days."

"And then you'll tell the D.A.?"

"And then Nick hopes to have the story done. He's going to talk to some people. Starting today with the plasterers."

I was mulling this over, and watching Tee pop bread into the toaster, when Betty came in through the back door.

"Hi, good morning," she said almost shyly. She went straight to the refrigerator. "No milk? Bret wanted some milk."

"Bret has his own refrigerator," I said grumpily. "He probably meant for you to look there."

Having failed to evict Tee, I now turned my sights on Betty Fox, whose tiresome intrusion, along with Bret's, was getting on my nerves. It was a delicate problem. If I told Bret she must stay above the garage with him, I would be repaid with crabby and sullen chauffeur behavior.

Somehow, the point was going to have to be made directly to her.

I eyed her warily. She was wearing the thin white robe she had on the two times I had visited her. Underneath were flannel pajamas. Her blond hair was its usual tangled mess. She stood there awkwardly.

I said, "Pour yourself a cup of coffee and come sit down."

"Toast?" offered Tee.

"Sure," said Betty. She brought the coffee over and glanced at the *Examiner*. "Anything happening?"

"They've got fifty investigators combing the city for Black Dahlia clues," I recited. "We're running letters she wrote to her mother. Today or tomorrow it's supposed to rain." Instinctively, I glanced out the window. In December and January they always predicted rain. The sun glared back at me. Tee delivered a plate of toast and Betty rolled up her sleeves before reaching for the jam. There was a large red mark on her right forearm.

"Did you hurt yourself?" I asked.

Betty smiled faintly. "Souvenir from the war. I usually keep it covered up."

"You were in the war?" said Tee, sounding skeptical.

"I was in the Red Cross. Well actually, I was recruited by the Red Cross. It was the Army that sent me overseas." She hesitated. "This came from the Battle of the Bulge."

"No," I said. "Really?"

"I was assigned to the Fifty-seventh Field Hospital. We were a mobile unit that moved along the front lines every five or six days. You know, after a battle."

"And . . . ?" I coaxed.

Betty laughed. "It was so stupid. There was a badly injured soldier and I was carrying a bowl of boiling water over to his bed, to clean up his wounds. And I tripped. It's a third-degree burn."

"So you're a nurse," said Tee, clearly unimpressed.

"I was a nursing student before the war."

"Now she's in secretarial school," I supplied.

"I saw enough blood for a lifetime," Betty said.

There was a clatter at the kitchen door. Betty looked up expectantly. "Is that the milkman, do you think?"

39

I continued sulking my way through the week. To the shock of nearly everyone, including the suspect cult of weather forecasters, the rains did come, beating down with seven months of pent-up fury. Up in the canyons the mud slides began, and down in the flats the phones went out. Nobody knew why the phones automatically went out when the rains came; it was just another bewildering weather phenomenon peculiar to the geography.

The phones were working at the paper though, but whenever I tried calling Walter at home , there was no answer. Nick, however grateful to me he might have been, never bothered to get in touch. The gossip machine continued to spew out Items unrelentingly. The police put on even more manpower in their search for the killer of the Black Dahlia; less to pull a deranged madman off the streets, I suspected, than in response to the big headlines carried by newspapers which knew a juicy story when they saw one. And the murder of Anne Bardon became just another L.A. County homicide statistic. Despite the obvious and unanswered questions.

They became my litany. If Henry had killed Anne (highly doubtful but terribly convenient), who had killed Henry? How could Jack Seeberg witness the murder of his girlfriend and cheerfully return to a party? Why hadn't he called the police, even anonymously? And who had sent me two notes and one bird, smashed my portrait, and finally taken a shot at me?

It wasn't until Friday afternoon that a tiny thought particle wiggled loose. Why it had taken so long, I did not know. The oversight. The stupid, glaringly obvious oversight. But that afternoon, catching a glimpse of George Healy strutting past Society, I finally grabbed the loose thread that had been evading me for a week.

I phoned Mocambo first. I called the club's music director second.

And then I called Jack Seeberg.

I told the breathy girl who manned his phone at MGM that I needed to speak to him right away. I told her I could not leave a number. I told her I was in a phone booth. I told her my name was May Babich. I said that I would wait.

I waited for several minutes before she came breathily back on the line. "Miss Babich? I just reached Mr. Seeberg on the set. But I can't transfer the call. You'll have to dial the main number and ask for Sound Stage twenty-three."

I thanked her and went through the routine. Seeberg picked up on the third ring. "May?"

"No. This is Paris Chandler. How are you, Mr. Seeberg?"

"Chandler? I thought . . . well, never mind. I'm rather tied up at the moment. Is this important?"

"Probably not," I said.

"Then let me call you back. The camera's warm, we've got to roll."

"It's just that I'm trying to make the early edition."

There was a pause. "With what?" he asked cautiously.

"And I'm still confused about the time."

"Good God, this isn't about Anne, is it? That story is finished. Can't you let her rest in peace?"

"A voice keeps calling from the grave."

"Don't be ridiculous, Paris. For God's sake." His tone changed then, as if he had dipped it in honey before sending it through the line. "Actually, I'm happy to hear from you. I've been thinking about you. A lot."

"Really," I said.

"Mm-hm. The more I think about it, the more I'm certain. You were born to be in the movies."

"I've been thinking about you, too, Mr. Seeberg. You're a born deceiver."

"Now Paris . . . listen to me."

"Ladies first. You told me that you went to look for Anne about nine-thirty. On the beach. And you told George Healy that when you got there, she was quarreling with Henry."

"Yes," he said, exasperated. "So what?"

"Mr. Seeberg, Henry was at Mocambo at nine-thirty. Playing the trumpet. He was there all night. So I don't think he killed her like you said. And I've got this problem. Only—let me see—thirty-three minutes till deadline."

I could hear him breathing then, into the phone. Behind him, someone called his name.

"I suppose in that case we better talk." He said it as if he were trying to placate a temperamental star.

"I'm listening, Jack."

"No. Not now, I can't now. Could you . . . hold the story? Till tonight? We'll talk then, tonight. It's terribly complicated."

"I've heard that song before," I said.

His voice faded and became muffled as, I assumed, he placed his hand over the mouthpiece. A moment or two passed. Then, "Do you know the spot on the beach where Anne was supposed to meet me?"

"Yes, vaguely."

"Be in the parking lot there. Eight-thirty."

"Uh-huh."

"I'll walk you through the whole thing."

"Uh-huh," I said. "Fine."

"Great. Till then?"

"Are you nuts?" I said.

"No. I just—" He began to laugh. The sound was rich and deep, but it didn't really send me. "I forgot, I'm a murderer." He sounded faintly amused. "Okay, look, bring someone with you, I don't care. Just don't bring the cops. You have no right to convict me until you have the goods. You still don't have the goods. And believe me, kitten, you won't find them on me. You'll see."

I didn't like the way he said "you'll see." I said, "Eight-thirty?"

"Yeah. And make it a girlfriend."

"Excuse me?"

"If the moon is out, who knows what might happen. Know what I mean, sugar?"

I didn't like the way he said that either.

I stood in the kitchen, my hands pressed on the Formica counter to keep them from shaking. Was he mad—come to the beach—or was I? The director telling his story in playacting form, staging a scene—would there be lights, cameras?—reverting to type, even though that scene recreated the murder of his lover. Answer: he possibly, me without question. But I knew I was going in, the way you know these things. There are times when instinct loses its connection with common sense, as if one part of the brain comes loose from the other. It was George Healy's story. George Healy could go to hell.

And Tee had a gun.

Nick was sitting at his desk when, nerves under control, I returned to Society. He was engrossed in *Variety*, leaning back in his chair, feet up on the desk. He was into his L.A. Country Club mode, open-necked white shirt, navy suit, red-striped tie sticking out of his breast pocket. I said, "How very you."

Nick smiled. "Fine, thank you. How you?"

"Kind of busy."

He tossed the paper onto his desk. "Then get busier. You've got to leave here by seven-thirty. Unless you want to go home and change first." He gave me a measured look. "You're okay the way you are."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Chasen's. Dinner at eight, as they say. We're celebrating."

"What are we celebrating?"

"That we're finally going to have dinner."

I glanced at his desk. A paper clip held together a sheaf of pages, the typing on the first page triple-spaced and pencil-edited. "Your story?"

"That's it. You can read all about it tomorrow. Or maybe Sunday. They might hold it till Sunday because the circulation's bigger."

"Folkes talked?"

"Wouldn't talk. But one of the plasterers did."

"How did it work?"

"I'll tell you all about it tonight." Absently, Nick fingered his neck, as if already anticipating having to put the tie on.

I shook my head. "I can't, Nick. I'm busy."

His eyes flickered. "Who's the lucky guy—Walter Ainsley?"

"I've got to make a phone call. Can you wait a minute? I'll be right back."

I sat down at my desk and dialed my number. Mrs. Keyes answered. Tee was out, she told me, and she didn't know when she'd return. Yes, Bret was there. Up in his room with Betty. I told Mrs. Keyes to have Tee phone me as soon as she returned and then I watched Nick, who was now on the telephone himself, until Bret, a few moments later, arrived unenthusiastically on the line. I told him about my meeting with Seeberg at eight-thirty. I said:

"Pick me up at the paper at quarter to eight. I'm going to have Tee meet us at the beach. Wear dark clothes, okay? And if you can stand it, leave Betty at the house."

This produced a silence. "Bret, are you there?"

"I was just thinking, Miss Chandler."

"What?"

"I'm better paid to do this kind of work in the movies," Bret said.

Which solved one problem, but not the problem of Nick Goodwin. I walked over and perched on the edge of his desk, right beside his perfectly polished loafers, while he finished his phone call. Eventually he put the receiver down. "So?"

"How about," I said, "making our dinner tonight a lateish sort of drink?"

"My, my, aren't we the social butterfly. Two dates in one night. Or, as we boys call it, a doubleheader."

"Keep that up and I'll shut you out."

"Shut me out? I thought you didn't like baseball. Who's the guy, Bob Feller?"

"Maybe—Is he cute?"

Nick grinned. "The Indians think so."

"Oh. Well actually it's Jack Seeberg."

Nick's eyes widened. "You serious, Paris?"

"Yes. But come with me into the kitchen."

Sitting on the counter, Nick listened as I gave him a rundown of where things stood. "So I figure how long can it take? I can meet you at Chasen's at ten-thirty I would think."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Why? I'll have practically my own posse. Nothing's going to happen."

"I'm going to happen. I'm coming, too."

"No, you're not. I mean this isn't a press conference. Just wait for me at Chasen's."

"Sure," said Nick. "I'm supposed to casually hold down a table while you're confronting a man who may have murdered two people and who has lured you back to the scene of the crime?"

"I won't be alone."

"You'll be with one very weird chauffeur who thinks he's Errol Flynn and a red-haired vixen who's sure she's Nancy Drew. Tee spies on cheating spouses. That's what she does."

"And cheating card players," I put in.

"And never fingered them. Paris, you're being a jerk."

"Er, excuse me." Theresa McKenzie stuck her head in the door. "Phone call, Paris. A Miss Jones. Shall I . . . ?"

"Thank you, I'll be right there." I took a deep breath and looked at Nick. "Are we on tonight or not?"

"Only if I'm in the starting lineup for both games."

"They're not connected, Nicky. They're two different games."

"And you're so good at games."

Wherever that came from, it stung. "At least I know which ones to stay out of."

I couldn't read the expression in his eyes. After a moment, I turned and walked out of the kitchen.

I kept walking, waiting for Nick to call after me.

He never did.

". . . Do not go along with a plan if you are not yet sure it's on the level."

40

It was not a night for the beach. The sky was black as tar, the air was heavy and damp. January. Occasionally a pair of headlights pierced through the inky gloom going east on Olympic. But otherwise, it could have been the road to hell. Bing Crosby and the Andrew Sisters scratched out "South America" on the radio. It was the wrong song for the wrong night. I shifted uncomfortably on the front seat.

I said, "He spent four days dying. So he has to be dead by now, don't you think? And if he's dead, what more could they possibly do? Reincarnate him?"

Betty Fox laughed. "I know. It's a hoot, isn't it?"

"Seriously."

"They called and told him they needed to shoot one more scene, at night. He's really sorry. Shall I stay on Olympic to San Vicente? It seems the best way to hit Sunset."

Betty's long tangle of blond curls was decorated by the red bandana she wore Indian style. In profile, she had one of those turned-up noses from the comic books and the promise of striking beauty. "Not Sunset," I said. "We're going to the beach. Stay on Olympic."

Betty turned and the promise broke. "The beach?"

The pink scar zigzagged across her cheek, looking angry under the harshness of the chiaroscuro light. I said, "Bret didn't tell you?"

"Well he was a bit crazy, running around like he does. But no. All he said was to pick you up at the paper before eight. Are you going to a party?"

I didn't answer. I had spoken to Tee from the office, told her about the Seeberg meeting, and asked how she thought we should proceed. She said she'd call me right back. She hadn't. I left another message for her with Mrs. Keyes and one with her Barney Feldman Investigations' answering service. "You wouldn't know if Tee called the house, would you?" I said anxiously.

"I'm afraid not. I was with Bret up in his room most of the time, so she might have called. It's funny how all this worked out, isn't it? How I met you and then him. I guess you could say Anne finally did something nice for me."

Betty was wearing a pair of what I feared, but dared not ask, were Bret's black cotton slacks and a white T-shirt that said, THE SUNRISE KID, which was the name of his movie. She wore a dark green wool jacket over that. She also had on some kind of cheap, cloying perfume. I lowered the window slightly on the pretext of lighting up. "Speaking of Anne, I'm surprised you never met Jack Seeberg," I said.

"He never came to her apartment. In fact, I wouldn't have believed he existed except she showed me all the nice things he bought for her." Betty paused. "She acted like she was entitled to them."

"You'd think Henry would have known he was being used," I remarked.

"Henry was a fool." Betty glanced in the rearview mirror. She grinned. "Say, you're not being followed, are you?"

I turned around. Far back in the distance a pair of dim headlights poked against the darkness. I turned back and said, "Did you know Henry well?"

"He practically lived in my apartment, hanging around hoping to see her. He was such a sap. And when she got pregnant, puleeze. It was like he was the father of fatherhood."

I tossed the cigarette. "You knew? I thought you hadn't seen her in a while."

"How about if we turn up Crescent Heights and hit Wilshire? No, I hadn't seen her in a while. But Henry kept in touch."

"Really?" Duke Ellington came on. I lowered my window farther. "You'd think she would have found a patsy with promise at least."

"Oh Henry had promise. He toured with Glenn Miller in the European Theater. Henry was quite talented you know."

"No, I didn't."

"But he lost his drive when he met her. She did that to men. Drained them of their drive and made them crazy."

She sounded resentful. Which made me wonder why she allowed Anne to use her apartment. She had said it was for the money. But now I wondered if it wasn't for the voyeurism factor as well.

"Did you ever see him after the murder?" I asked.

"No." Again she checked the rearview mirror. "You're still working on the story?"

"Yes."

"Frankly, I didn't believe what Seeberg said either." She glanced at me for a reaction.

"Why is that?" I asked, interested.

"What would Henry's motive have been? Seeberg had a motive, he was tired of her, if you ask me. Or from what Bret says, it could have been that weird Seeberg woman. Or even . . ."

I didn't like that, Bret telling her things. "Or what?"

Betty shook her head. "Nothing. Really."

"Pull over," I said. "There's a phone."

I shut myself into the booth and rang the house. No answer. It suddenly occurred to me that Mrs. Keyes would be out, having her Friday night at the movies. I left another message with Tee's service. Then I rang the operator to get her home number.

A few cars sped by. I glanced at Betty. She was leaning back in her seat tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. I let the phone ring and wondered suddenly how she knew Henry had been talented.

Still no answer. This wasn't like Tee at all. Not coming through. I suddenly felt apprehensive. I was on my way to meet Seeberg without my little posse. Without—what had Nick called them? Errol Flynn and Nancy Drew.

I listened to the ringing. Thinking, well at least she had been a nurse, had even gone through a war.

It was eight-fifteen. And Tee had taken a powder.

I hung up and went back to the car.

We turned into the parking lot twenty minutes later. Except for a black Chevy, the lot was deserted. So was the Chevy.

Betty pulled on the hand brake. "Now what?"

"We'll wait." Two streetlamps at the entrance of the parking area bounced light off the gray mist that had settled over the beach. I could hear the waves pounding the shore, as if trying to pummell it into submission. Occasionally a car sped past. Betty rotated the dial until she found a big-band station. I said, "I can't understand why I haven't heard from Tee."

"You mean she's supposed to meet you here?"

"I've left messages for her everywhere."

"Personally, I don't know if I would count on her if I were you," said Betty knowingly.

"What do you mean?"

"Excuse me for saying so, but I don't much care for her. I think she's a snoop."

I laughed. "But of course she is. She's paid to."

"I mean in your house. I've seen her—poking around. She asks Mrs. Keyes questions about you. And Bret, too."

"What are you saying?"

Betty seemed to hesitate. "Well . . ." But she didn't go on.

I turned and studied the black Chevy. It could have been a studio car. He could be on the beach, waiting for me.

I looked at her. "Tell me."

Betty glanced at her nails. "I hope you won't be mad." She put her hands in her lap. "But one night, I couldn't sleep. And it was cold up over the garage. So I went down to the kitchen to make some hot milk. I noticed a light on down the hall. Like somebody had forgot to turn it off. The light was in the study. I guess she didn't hear me come in. She was going through your desk."

"Tee was?"

"She said she was looking for writing paper, but it seemed queer. At two in the morning? I was going to say something to you, but—I thought maybe it wasn't my business to."

I found another cigarette, lit it, and didn't reply. Why *was* Tee hanging around my house anyway? The threats had stopped; the story had died. My thoughts turned dark. A dead bird, a smashed photograph, the fake letter that Henry Tooker supposedly sent. Tee could have planted the threats, but why?

My thoughts turned darker. She had sent the dead bird. Then convinced Nick to persuade me I needed her protection. That was possible. But I couldn't in my mind make it plausible. Unless . . .

Jack Seeberg had hired her.

To monitor my progress. To try, by using the threats, to frighten me off the story. *She* knew all along I was working on the story, but in the beginning, how could he have? Unless . . . I glanced at the dashboard clock. Ten minutes till nine.

"Betty," I said. "I'm going to take a walk. If Jack Seeberg shows up, tell him I've gone looking for him."

Betty stared at me. "What?"

I smiled. "It's okay. If I don't find him, I'll come right back."

Betty grabbed my arm. "Wait. Let me go with you. You can't go alone."

"If Tee comes, have her wait. And lock the doors."

I got out of the car. And started toward the beach.

I stood on the sand. The pounding surf lay several hundred feet away, a dim smudge in the dark, soupy night. To my left, about twenty feet along, I could see the kiosk where ice cream and soft drinks were sold in the summer. It was boarded up this time of year, but a streetlamp bathed it in a faint glow. The cottages began farther along the beach to the right, but most were dark, used only occasionally on weekends during the winter months. A fog had begun to roll in.

I took a deep breath and headed into it.

Tee had a history.

She had worked for gangsters. She had come into the picture from the wrong angle, through Nick and a crooked card game. She had been tracking the card game long before Anne Bardon died. No, I had it wrong. Seeberg hadn't gone to her, she had contacted him. She had been at the house the night I was looking at his films. Nick could have told her more. She saw an opportunity. . . .

I had reached the back of the first cottage.

It was surrounded by a high brick wall, put up to give its owners privacy from the public beach. But I could see a lighted window on the second floor. I realized then I didn't know which of the houses belonged to the Davises. I took off my shoes and shook out the sand.

"Jack?"

The letters I had taken from Henry's house had disappeared from my bedroom. And Tee had free run of my house for nearly two weeks.

I was beginning to shiver from the damp cold and wished suddenly I had gone home to change. The thin wool dress I was wearing, even under the double-knit navy sweater, offered little protection from the dropping temperatures. I arrived at house number two.

From somewhere behind me I could hear the muffled growl of a car engine grow louder, then stop. I listened, straining for the sound of a door slamming; a voice. But the waves drowned out everything. I paused for a moment and waited.

Thinking. This is how Anne Bardon had done it three weeks before. Stumbling along the sand . . . was it a moonless night as well? Lauralee back there in the car, Anne on her way to meet Seeberg . . . but why? To collect ten thousand dollars? To beg to stay? To threaten an abortion? Coming here alone . . . cocky, angry, tearful, what? The fog . . .

Cold, wet sand poured into my shoes as I trudged along. My thoughts returned to Tee. If she were working for Seeberg, then it had to be him, or Helen, who had murdered Anne. Only . . . I stopped. Something made me turn.

I stared hard into the murky night. From the direction of the parking lot, someone was coming toward me.

I stepped back against someone's backyard wall and watched the approaching shape, phantomlike in the mist. But suddenly I knew it wasn't going to be Jack Seeberg. If he had truly meant to acquit himself, he would have waited for me in the parking lot. Had he meant me harm, he would have approached from the other direction, the way he had come the night he was supposed to meet Anne. If he had simply arrived late and was now looking for me, he would have called my name.

I began moving sideways until I reached the end of the wall. It curved around and continued along the side of the house. The next house was twenty feet away. I could slip around the corner of this one and see who passed by. But I realized then that another wall had been built solidly along Pacific Coast Highway to prevent sunbathers from coming through, and I didn't want to get trapped between the two houses. I scooted along to house number four.

The house was dark. I looked farther up the beach. The next light shone dimly, far off in the distance . . . unless I walked straight out toward the water and circled round, back to the lot. I turned. I had lost the figure in the fog. I stepped back and flattened myself against the wall.

A sliver of sky broke open, allowing a moonbeam to escape. I crouched down and waited. And wanted a cigarette.

Endless moments passed before I saw her.

"Paris?"

She was coming straight toward me, walking close to the wall. I didn't move.

She stopped and looked around. "He's here. Paris?"

I let out the breath I had been holding. Slowly I stood up, but she had already spotted me.

"Whew," exclaimed Betty. "You gave me a scare. He's here—in the lot."

I brushed the sand off my skirt. "Is he alone?"

"Yes."

"All right." I shook out my shoes and started to walk back.

"Hold it," said Betty. "Right there."

The gun came out from under her jacket. It held steady in her right hand. I noticed that, and how she instinctively spread her feet for better balance. "A little more to your left, I think. That's about where Anne was."

I didn't feel fear, the way you often don't when you're in an emergency situation. My thoughts seemed crystal clear. But I was aware of the pounding of my blood.

"Anne was found nearer to the kiosk," I said carefully.

"She tried to run. Don't try to run. A Luger's only accurate at ten feet, but I'm fast."

I said nothing.

"You might as well relax until Jack gets here. We've got a bit of a wait."

"Who pulled into the lot?"

I didn't like the sound of her laugh. "Two guys with a bottle. Sorry, Miss Priss, you're on your own."

She took a step closer. The gun was dark and dull and steady as a rock. With her left hand she slipped off her bandana. "Here, hold out your hands. Quickly!"

She must have tied the bandana with a slip knot when she put it on her head. I looked at the loop. Once I put my hands through, she could tug one of the tails tight. I held out my arms. She was slightly shorter than I, but more muscular. Had she been a man, I never would have tried it. But as she stepped forward, bandana in her left hand, I suddenly brought my right leg up, knee first.

The knee struck her right hand, throwing her back and sending the gun flying. The gun hit the sand to my left and her right. You're never as good going to your left. She hit the ground a second before I did and got the gun under her. There was no point tusseling with her for it. I fell back immediately and got slowly to my feet.

A split second later, she bulled into me, head first, a hard blow to the stomach that sent me reeling. On my knees, bent over, fighting for air, I felt a thin stream of sour liquid dribble out of my mouth. I coughed.

"You fool," she said angrily from somewhere above me. "Pretty girls always think they can get away with anything. Get up."

A wave of nausea shot up to my throat and lodged there. Without protest, I let her tighten the bandana around my wrists and then, one-handed, she double-knotted it. "Now sit down."

Before I could respond, the gun changed hands and a fist belted me in the stomach, knocking me down again and exploding stars in my head. I gasped in pain.

I listened to my ragged breathing and waited for the stars to go away. She had me facing north, so that if anyone came from the direction of the parking lot, the only likely direction, she would see that person first.

"You must have left a message with his service," I said finally. "Telling him to come later, didn't you? You did that the night you killed Anne, too. Only you called her service and left a message pushing up the time to nine o'clock. I suppose you got the numbers from Anne."

"The rat gave them to me. 'Oh Betty, do you mind? Just check my service, will you? Jack might leave a message and I need you to leave one for him covering for me.'" Her voice had taken on a mocking falsetto. "She often played hookey. Or should I say nooky?"

"But how did you know about the meeting that night?"

"How do you think, stupid? Henry told me. He was a wreck, as usual. Afraid she was going to tell Jack the truth about the baby. And that he would help her get an abortion and let her stay. Henry was always telling me his problems."

"I'm sure you were a good listener." Betty's head jerked up and I could tell she was staring hard into the distance. I said, "But I don't see why you interfered. Maybe she would have succeeded. Then your problem would have been solved. You could have nursed Henry's broken heart."

"Henry would never have given up, the two-timing snake."

"Well, you sure showed him," I said dryly.

"He deserved it. He wrote me letters saying he would always love me and then he wrote the same letters to Anne. After all I did for him. Sitting by his bed night after night, holding his hand, bringing him water and . . ." Her voice was bitter.

"In the war?" I said.

"They were playing outside London when the Germans came over. Henry was hit in the head with a piece of flying debris. A deep scalp wound." She snickered. "It was love at first sight."

A girl named Elizabeth had introduced Anne to Henry, Henry had said. I remembered that now. At Mocambo. Elizabeth Something. Who had been Henry's girlfriend, until Anne came along.

"You had to know it wouldn't last. With Anne," I said.

"What do you know? I gave that bastard a week, but he was inconsolable. I couldn't stand it anymore."

"Ah."

The pain had shifted from my stomach around back to my wrists. I could feel my hands growing numb. I said, "You should quit while you're ahead, if you ask me. You set Seeberg up for the Bardon kill, but who's going to believe he shot old Henry?"

"Shut up, Paris."

"You know what I think, Betty? I think you shot Henry for the money. Henry must have told you Anne gave him the money to keep until she went away. But you didn't find it. Pity."

Betty took a step closer. "And you did? Where? Tell me where the money is."

It was my ace in the hole. Tempt her with the money. Use it to get us off this godforsaken beach. And soon. The way she had planned it, Seeberg was to show up and find my body. Enough people knew I was supposed to meet him here. That had been her plan all along. To pin Anne's murder on Seeberg. Only Jack had botched things up with his account in the paper. Once that happened, she must have known that sooner or later, somebody was going to tumble to the fact that Henry had been at Mocambo that night. And the logical person to tumble to it was me. Which left me needing to be dead, and Seeberg perfectly placed to take the fall for all three.

I said, "You went to Anne's house looking for it, I suppose. The night you murdered her. Wasn't there. You took her address book, though. Were you afraid your number was in it? And you took her checkbook too, but what you wanted wasn't in her bank account. Then you must have found out Henry had the money. So you did see him after her murder. Yes, that's what happened. And you thought how nice it would be to buy some of those swell things Anne always flaunted. So you decided to kill Henry and grab the money. Congratulations. Your revenge would have been complete."

"Where is it? You have ten seconds."

"If I told you it wouldn't matter. You'd need me to get it."

Her head jerked up. "Quiet!" she hissed.

From behind me I could hear a faint crunching of sand. Quickly Betty moved her gun hand behind her back.

The crunching grew louder.

"Hey, hi, girls. Is everything all right?"

Oh, God, I thought, oh no.

A moment passed. And then the voice was directly over me. "Say, what's going on?"

Slowly I raised my head and looked up into the confused face of my chauffeur, Bret.

Betty's gun hand came whipping around. "Hold it, lover, right there."

"What?" said Bret. He glanced down at me, hoping to find the punch line. It was then he noticed my hands were tied. "Are you all right, Miss Chandler?"

I nodded.

"Shut up, lover. We were just having an interesting gab."

Bret looked again at Betty, as if he suddenly realized he had made a mistake, thinking she was someone he knew.

I said, "Princess Elizabeth over there has already killed one boyfriend. So don't be cute."

"Sweetheart, said Bret with a choked laugh. "What are you doing? Why are you holding that gun?"

Oh Christ, I thought.

"I'm not your stupid sweetheart." She aimed the gun straight at him. "Now shut up."

"Betty . . ." wailed Bret brokenheartedly.

"Don't move."

"You lied to me, didn't you? About the shoot tonight." His voice trailed off. He stood there miserably.

"Where's the money?" Betty angrily said. "Ten seconds."

She was standing her accurate ten feet away, Luger now leveled at me. For a moment, I thought something had moved behind her, near the wall. But it didn't move again and I realized it was probably just the low branch of a backyard tree swaying over the wall.

"Eight seconds," Betty said. "Then your driver will make number three. Four, if you count the German I killed in Bourgogne. Don't move, Bret."

He was standing a couple of feet off to my left, staring at her. "But why?"

"She used you to keep track of me," I said wearily. "Love is never pretty."

"Four seconds."

"All right, Betty. The money is—"

"Don't tell her, Miss Chandler!"

To my horror, Bret was moving toward Betty. A blue flash, the shattering noise, and the night broke into a million pieces. Bret recoiled, the sighing noise of the air going out of him as he hit the ground at my feet, his right arm flailing backward and crashing into my face, jolting me. And then, a profound silence, as if the third act had abruptly ended, sucking the breath from the astonished audience. I felt the hot tears streaming down my face from the bashing of my nose as I lay on the sand, pinned down by Bret's dead weight . . . waiting for the final curtain to fall.

41

I could hear the sound of Betty's rubber soles on the sand. Her shoulder, and part of her face, floated into view. A blur of movement. And then a thwack, a sound like a hammer hitting soft wood. Betty groaned and seemed to slip away. The next thing I saw was the cold, angry face of Theodora Jones, staring at the ground, gun pointed.

The body seem to rise up before me. I felt suddenly light.

"Whew, that was close."

Tee looked over and grinned. "Nice work, partner." She turned back to Betty, crumpled on the ground. "I clocked her cold," she said unnecessarily.

I was staring at Bret standing above me. I said, "You're all right?"

Bret made a face. "What do you think? I just spent a week doing this, Miss Chandler."

"And got better paid for it, too. Here, please help me up."

Shakily, I got to my feet just as there came the pounding footsteps and hard breathing of Nick Goodwin and Sergeant Billy Beame, police revolver drawn. It seemed a night for guns. They stopped short.

"Welcome to Mercury Theater," I intoned.

"Are you okay?" said Nick.

"Who's this?" demanded Beame.

"Sergeant, meet Princess Elizabeth," Tee answered. She slipped her gun into her big jacket with all the pockets.

Nick came over to me. "Paris?"

I was still shaken, but I forced a smile. "A late addition to the starting lineup, I believe they say."

"Or better late than never, as they also say."

He put his arms around me and began stroking my hair. I was shivering now from the cold, and the aftermath of the fear. "Does that apply to Chasen's, too?" I mumbled into his leather jacket. "I could really use that drink."

But the drink had to wait.

According to the accounts, painstakingly taken down by Billy Beame somewhat later that night, Bret had dutifully passed the word to Betty that he had to "take Miss Chandler to the beach," and that she would have to stay home. It was not hard for Betty to squeeze a few more pertinent details out of him, as she had been doing all along.

Tee, meanwhile, had been growing increasingly suspicious of Betty. She could not figure out how someone, on at least two occasions, managed to show up at my house, where there is no set routine for comings and goings, when no one was there. Also, according to Tee, it was she who found Betty going through my desk one night. But Tee could figure neither motive nor wherewithal to match Betty to the crimes. Plus, she seemed too dippy. But after hearing of her war escapades, and knowing that many soldiers had returned home with German Lugers as souvenirs, she decided to take a look at Betty's apartment.

Which is where she was late that afternoon.

"No gun, but I found plenty of other stuff," she told Sergeant Beame. "I found the letters that Anne had written to Henry and another packet that Henry had written to Betty. Some during the war. I also found pieces of jewelry and a fur jacket."

Tee had used Betty's phone to call me at the paper. Which is why she said she would call me back—she wanted to get out of there. She had taken the letters and made the quick drive to her office. But as often happens late on a Friday afternoon when both the Saturday and the Sunday papers are in the works, she couldn't get through the *Examiner* switchboard. She kept trying. Then finally she called the house. And Betty, of course, had answered the phone.

"She told me that Seeberg had cancelled and that Bret had just left the house to pick you up," Tee recounted. "She said Etta Rice had you going to some party. So I went out and grabbed a sandwich. Then I went back up to my office to get some paperwork done."

Which is when she called her service and got the message from me: "Paris called. Urgent."

The time of the message had been six o'clock. Her phone call to Betty had been half an hour later. It was now eight o'clock. She phoned the house and got no answer. The urgent, she reasoned, could have been in regard to the change of plans; "Paris telling me Seeberg was off." Or maybe the urgent meant something else entirely. Tee locked up her office and took off for the beach. But on the way, she decided to stop by the house first.

"Which is when she ran into me," said Bret.

Bret, who had been up in his room going over lines for another audition he had copped, was surprised when Betty came running up the stairs saying a call had just come telling him to be at the studio at eight. He went, found no one there and, worrying that Betty had got the message wrong, returned to the house, only to encounter Tee pulling out of the driveway.

Racing along Santa Monica, Bret told his story and Tee hatched her plot.

"When Bret told me he had sent Betty to pick up Paris, I got worried sick," Tee said. "I dropped him off in the parking lot and told him to see if he could find them. Then I drove up the beach a ways, banged on somebody's door and asked if I could go through the gate to the beach."

Nick, meanwhile, had phoned Sergeant Beame and told him that I had placed Henry at Mocambo at the time of Anne's murder and that when I told Seeberg this, he had requested the beach rendezvous with me. Nick had driven to the Santa Monica police station and taken off with Beame. The only problem was that Nick had thought the rendezvous was set for somewhere near the Davis house, and that is where they went. When nothing had happened by 8:45, Beame used the Davises' phone to call the Seebergs' house. Helen answered and told him her husband had just called from MGM fifteen minutes ago to say he was leaving soon but had a stop to make first. They went back to wait. Hearing muffled voices, they began walking south. The sound of the shot brought them on the run.

Betty was booked on three counts of murder, Anne's baby included, and thrown in jail. Seeberg, who had come tearing into the parking lot in his Pierce-Arrow, late, at nine-twenty, was shown into a separate room and brought coffee and a *Saturday Evening Post* while he waited to be questioned after Beame had finished with us.

Beame didn't get through with us until after midnight. It was too late to go to Chasen's.

". . . If a beau tells you he loves you, you can be sure of it!"

42

"And it never occurred to you to call?"

"Yes, of course. I asked repeatedly to use the phone. But he refused. He said for once he wanted to get the news before the paper did."

"Well, George would have known what to do."

Harold Gibbons was already at work on the pipe, nine-thirty in the morning. His white shirt-sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, his concession to Saturday informality. Len Kramer was standing next to the desk, one shirt tail already working its way out of his pants, despite the aid of yellow suspenders, which had enough to do keeping his pants up under the bulk of his belly.

"Where is George now?" said Harold. He picked up a little metal device and began prodding the tobacco in his pipe.

"On his way to the Santa Monica police station," said Len triumphantly.

"What?" I said incredulously.

"A.P. moved the story early this morning. George saw it and took off." He was talking to Harold, his back rudely to me.

I said, "Why bother? I was there."

"When he comes back, we'll sit down, she'll give us what she's got."

"Ummm," said Harold puffing away and thinking about it.

I decided to help him. "George got it wrong before. Isn't it time I got my turn?"

"She's getting hysterical," Len said. "I hate when women get hysterical."

"She might have a point," said Harold without much conviction. "But I don't understand why Seeberg . . ." As usual, he left his sentence dangling.

"He thought his wife did it," I filled in. "He found Anne's body and he decided Helen had murdered her. They had quarreled about her, often. So he told George that story hoping to get Helen off the hook. He said he was an honorable man."

"Hmm," said Harold. "I see." Meaning he didn't. He stared at the shuttered window. "Then again, she was there," he said unconnectedly.

"So what? You think the reader cares she was there? Readers don't care about the trials of reporters. They just want facts, and George will get the facts."

Harold was nodding, but not saying anything. I stood. "Maybe this time he'll even get the right facts." I walked out.

The mail was being sorted into the wooden departmental slot box when I returned to Society. I took my letters back to my desk and sat down. Even if I had gotten to the phone last night, they would not have accepted the story from me, I could see that. I would always be "the girl in the dresses," as Len Kramer once described me, no matter what. To cheer myself up, I vowed that next week I would apply for a job at another paper. Maybe even the *Times*. The thought made me grin.

An early edition of Sunday's paper had been put on my desk. At the moment, Nick's card-cheating scandal was the lead story on the front page, the Black Dahlia case having dropped below the fold. I wondered if Betty Fox's arrest would bump Nick's story off the top. I sipped my coffee and read it through. A nice piece of writing done in the first person by Nick Goodwin, "our reporter on the scene." Right.

Nick had apparently discussed his suspicions with the D.A., who was quoted as saying that Gardiner Folkes was being brought in for questioning and that a grand jury would be called to consider the evidence available. Nick named the men who played, but stopped short of fingering possible cheats.

I stopped reading and picked up the phone to call him and tell him nice work. And maybe resurrect the Chasen's invitation. But his line was busy.

The scam, as it was pieced together, worked this way. Three-inch concave lenses had been fitted into the ceiling over four players' chairs. A spotter on the floor above could move from peephole to peephole and see what cards those players had. Then he would signal instructions through Morse-codetype electrical vibrations on a receiver strapped to a collaborator's leg.

"The peephole man probably told his sidekick how to play the hand with the signals," Nick speculated.

I put down the paper and tried his number again. He answered on the first ring.

"Hello?"

Something stopped me then, an invisible hand grabbing my voice box. A feeling of uncertainty swept over me.

"Hello? Who is this?"

I hesitated.

"Is anybody there?"

I put the receiver down gently.

I spent an hour and a half in the conference room with George Healy and Len Kramer, filling in the blanks as calmly as I could. After that, I went back to Society and tapped out my end of Etta's column. Michael Curtiz had screen-tested nineteen girls for a one-line bit in *The Unsuspected.* And Joan Blondell had got a black eye that kept her off a movie set one whole day. I was almost finished when the phone rang.

"Paris? It's Ted Stein."

"Hi," I said, surprised.

"I just saw the early edition of tomorrow's paper."

"I never heard of Nick Goodwin. I swear."

"I'm glad. Because he was in here the other day and he looks a lot like that fellow you went to the prom with. What was his name?"

"I can't imagine who you're talking about."

"Mm. Well anyway. I know this is short notice, but if I remember correctly, you're not a long-notice girl. There's a dance at the country club tonight. Why don't you come with me?"

"Well—"

"Better late than never?"

That is what Nick had said. Did they all read the same guide to smooth-talk girls? I smiled.

"It would be my pleasure," I told him.

Later, when I was cleaning off my desk, shoveling the week's debris into the wastebasket and sorting through the mail, I came across a letter addressed to me in an envelope bearing the *Examiner*'s letterhead. The note inside had been scribbled on a sheet of copy paper.

> *Kid—*
>
> *Wanted you to know I'm going underground for a while. Don't worry. They claim they can straighten me out, if I want to be straight. I don't know if I do, but I'm sick of these four walls. I'll talk to you when I talk to you. Hang in there.*
>
> *Yours truly, Walter*
>
> *P.S. Am returning the book to the library so you won't have to pay a fine.*

I slipped the letter into my purse, switched off the lights and walked down the stairs.

The Bentley was parked at the curb.

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DIANE K. SHAH has been the West Coast editor for *GQ*, a sports columnist for the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, and has covered sports for *Newsweek*. She is currently at work on her second Paris Chandler mystery, *Dying Cheek to Cheek*.

Hollywood, 1947. It's a town of glittering stars and lavish excess, where actors are legends, studio heads are gods, and even crimes are larger than life. It's the perfect setting for Paris Chandler, an ex-deb with a nose for celebrity dirt and a job with Etta Rice, queen of the gossip columnists. But as rumors fly fast and furious, Paris will discover a disquieting thing: when private trysts and intimate passions go public, so does murder.

While Cary Grant and Ava Gardner are sharing an intimate booth at Chasen's and Joltin' Joe DiMaggio is being wheeled into surgery, Paris Chandler is at her desk in the Society Department at *The Los Angeles Examiner.* Her boss, the flamboyant Etta Rice, is where she always is—out—and the day is off to its usual start...until Mrs. Jack Seeberg, wife of the famed movie director, walks in with a juicy tip. Only trouble is, the tip's a fraud, the shapely brunette's a fake, and the next time Paris sees her, she's in the Santa Monica morgue.

Now Paris has a crack at covering a real crime story...if she can unravel the mystery of the woman with a face but no name, a home but no friends. As the city reels from the shock of the Black Dahlia murder, Paris is whisked down a winding trail of broken hearts and busted dreams... of deception and danger...and deeper still into the tarnished world of Hollywood illusion—and murder.

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